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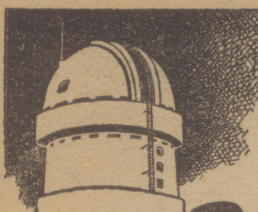
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Cover painting by Arnold Kohn, illustrating a scene from "We Dance for the Dom"

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HOWARD BROWNE

WITH THIS first issue of 1950, Howard Browne takes the reins from the capable hands of Raymond A. Palmer as the new editor-in-chief of **AMAZING STORIES**. We consider ourselves extremely fortunate in having been able to lure away from the gold signs and glamor of Hollywood, this extremely capable and prolific author of five best-selling novels, innumerable science-fiction stories, over 500 radio scripts, and several movie scenarios. This is probably the first time in history that a magazine has stolen a stellar writer from Hollywood, rather than the other way around.

FROM A childhood spent in Arapahoe and Lincoln, Nebraska, Howard moved to

Chicago when he was 18. Shortly thereafter, a chance occurrence led him to read a textbook on creative writing and then, more as a gag than anything else, he tried his hand at doing fiction. He was startlingly successful from the very beginning—and achieved great popularity in pulp science-fiction under numerous pseudonyms.

UNDER HIS now famous pen name of John Evans, he has established an enviable reputation for himself as a writer of outstanding mystery-suspense novels, and has been acclaimed by reviewers as being among the best mystery writers of our time.

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WE DANCE for the DOM

By Richard S. Shaver

The Dom had a triple crown, and it was by a strange circumstance indeed that he set it on Green Wing's head!

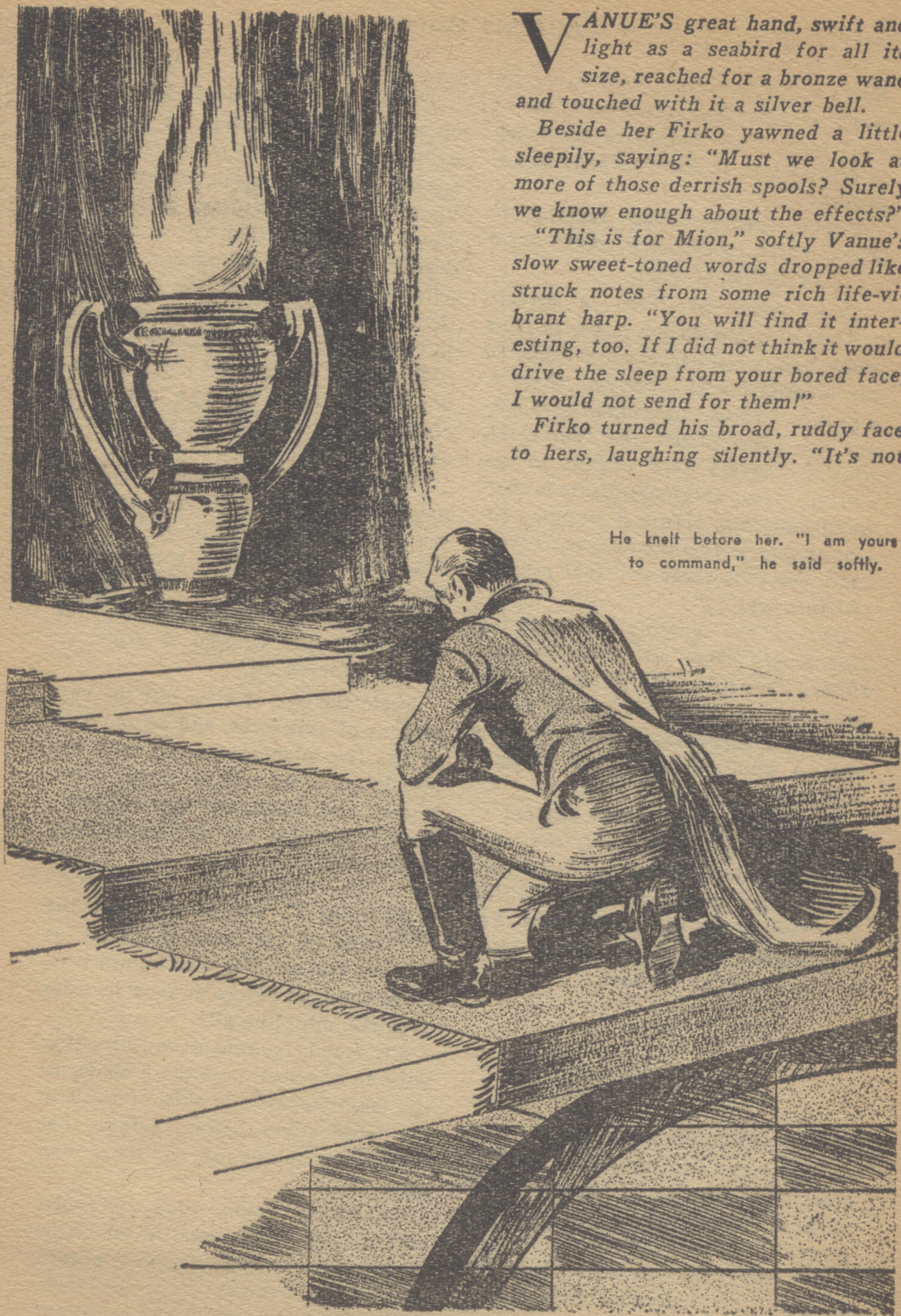
VANUE'S great hand, swift and light as a seabird for all its size, reached for a bronze wand and touched with it a silver bell.

Beside her Firko yawned a little sleepily, saying: "Must we look at more of those derrish spools? Surely we know enough about the effects?"

"This is for Mion," softly Vanue's slow sweet-toned words dropped like struck notes from some rich life-vibrant harp. "You will find it interesting, too. If I did not think it would drive the sleep from your bored face, I would not send for them!"

Firko turned his broad, ruddy face to hers, laughing silently. "It's not

He knelt before her. "I am yours to command," he said softly.



sleep, its dreams from your eyes, the magic of your hair, the moonshine of your ivory flesh caught in my mind. A man in love is always sleepy in appearance."

Vanue ignored him, turning to Mion, come to Falnorn, their home on the satellite of Enn.

"You came to learn a certain method of organization to use in your work among the barbarian nations. In the records I will show you, there is a group of races, intermixed throughout one giant planet and four satellites. These are dark planets in unstarred space, yet their culture is shattered and falls before a singular societies grasp for dominance. I will show you why these peaceful peoples fell into war..."

One of the floating-haired young Nor maids came on quick silkenly sliding feet upon the glittering mirror-floor. Into her Mistress' hands she put a file-disc, bearing in slots near a hundred spools of thought wire.

The fluorescing vapors swirled in the prisoning force field, the augmented record reached out and seized us with the greater-than-reality illusion that is the value of record. For one can not forget or miss one detail of the recorded wisdom.

* * *

CHAPTER ONE

THE EYE of view swept space through and narrowed on the slow, slow, turning of four dark balls about a fifth—much greater and the center.

Each of them was starred with the red and gold and green of city domes. The red were the factory cities, the green the places of growth of plants for food, and the gold were where the peoples lived—and lived for the plea-

sure of life alone.

Then oddly, the eye of view swept up and away from the five balls of spinning rock, and outward for a space. Narrowing again to closer view upon a vague drifting, a glowing cloud wide-flung like a great river of deadly, venomous mist-force. A serpentine tide of dust-motes, giving off through the projection-screen the jarring vibrance of exploding atoms.

The slow, impersonal voice of Vanue struck again through the great chamber, and Mion's heart rose to it as always:

"The current already impinges upon the orbit of Gran Jac, the largest planet. For one month of our days it has so flowed. I want you to notice the change. It is my purpose to show the error it brings into their pattern of life. Greater it grows as the flow increases."

Again the eye of view left the vast serpent of evil force, and swung back to the five planets, starred with the city keeps of several divergent races. Nearer, and down, and now alighting upon a wide balcony within the Keep of Dorneen.

* * *

MELOA T, her name, upon the band of her carnival bonnet, as was the custom. For who knows who, when the mad gaiety sweeps in tides of mirth, mingling all?

She stood, looking down, brooding with an anger strange there above all the laughter and the skirl of music in the wide plaza below. Anger that these were untouched, while her own mate...

Golden her skin, blue and soft-curled her rich wealth of hair. Brown-red her eyes, hot with a deep resentment against Fate, or men. Some thing upon which she could not quite pin the fault.

Glittering the badge hidden from the casual eye between her firm

breasts—that badge the sign of the Winged Blade, set with the single green gem of Dom, given her as a special honor by the Triple Crown himself.

Puzzled her thought, for until a month ago, peace had lain like a blanket of warm benevolence between the five planets—and now had struck the plague!

The plague, strange rumours of its being spread by conspirators, and deaths unexplained even by the plague. To top it, her own Kal Harn had shown the angry red spot to her inadvertently. She knew!

Silly of him to avoid her, to pretend anger, she knew it meant death. That he should think she wanted life without him! Yet, he would not come near her. Even now he waited in the hidden craft among the cold rocks outside, that had brought her. Locked in, he spoke to her only through the telaug disc within her shoulder ornament.

Kal Harn, an Eagle Blade, to fall among the first! When the sudden need was so great, their peril, unexpected—finding them all at a loss.

A soft sound, behind—she whirled.

Kal Harn himself, come here in spite of the spot upon his arm! She put up her arms to him, but his lean face remained aloof, he put her arms aside.

"It can't hurt to look, poor devils. They are all laughing to keep out the fear. To have one last fling before..."

Even as Meloa noted he had forgotten to conceal the Eagle Blade, shining symbol upon his bright green tunic with the silver star beneath, as if even *here* the Blades had no enemies—the man came from the doorway, on the run!

He left his feet two paces away, and struck Kal with both knees high in the small of his back.

Kal fell with a groan, as the Felar-

nese, his black-bristled face distorted with savage, strange hate, tugged a leaden sap from his hip, swung it up.

Kneeling there on Kal, he ignored Meloa as a helpless bit of decoration, which was a vast mistake.

MELOA CAUGHT the heavy sap as he swung it down—in her palm, wrenched and twisted hard. The leather and lead came free from his clutch, and Meloa swung as quick as a striking snake—down upon the shaven head of the attacker.

Head and sap made a sickening dull thud together. The thing was heavier than it seemed, but even as he pitched forward she struck again, above his ear. He fell across Kal's back, so that she had to roll him over to get him off.

Kal grinned weakly. "I can't get used to this! We never had trouble with the Felarnese, much as they may hate us. Now, they're after our blood on sight!"

"You!" Meloa could not keep the angry scorn out of her voice. "You knew, yet you wore the Blade in plain sight! What kind of agent are you? Don't you even know why we are here?"

Kal looked at her dumbly, rubbing his side.

"Oh, Kal, you are sicker than you realize! Please let me take you now, this nad, to Med-Center."

Kal sat up, still rubbing his back.

"Did you tell me why we're here, darling? I didn't attend the meeting, you know."

"I tried to, but how do I know if you listened when you wouldn't even let me see you? If you had remained in the ship, as you said! It wouldn't have mattered. Now, we're spotted!"

"Maybe not. It doesn't matter now anyway. Hear the call?"

From the disc on her shoulder or-

nement, and the one hidden in his uniform cap, was coming the thin scream of summons. They knew what the sound meant, though no one but a Blade would even have noticed the thin, cery vibration, almost inaudible.

"The Teyna screams!" said Meloa, gripping with her hands the strong arm of Kal Harn, now leaning sickened against the balustrade. The attacker's knees had struck hard and deep, leaving agony in the soft kidney region.

"They sent us here, to Dornoon. Now they summon us back! Something has happened. And we have learned nothing."

"We have learned the Felarnese seek our lives. It is much, the Blades needed to be sure of that."

Meloa still stood over the prone, long limbed body of the unconscious foreigner, the sap swinging in her hand thoughtfully. Kal frowned.

"Long, long have the rumours floated, but it meant little. Now, suddenly, all the little states are splitting off from the Triple Crown, the Dom knows not where to turn. All falls upon we Blades. We must pin down the center from which this death purpose flows. Perhaps there is no center, but only some madness without real plan. Perhaps it is the plague, the fear of it, the attempt to retreat into isolation and so stem the spread of it."

Meloa snorted, wrinkling her nose in unmaidenly disgust. "You think like any babe! It is the Triple Crown they want, and these dissident groups are aggravated by false attacks—and so are turned against the Dom by some plotting group. We will find them, and the struggle will cease as quickly as it began. The ancient compact can not fall! The progress of a century of peace would be wiped out. All will be at the throats of the other again, as in the old days. It cannot

be! Someone must see to that!"

"You're too optimistic," said Kal. "The Dom is old, and too cunning for his own good. He is not trusted, too often have his little schemes been exposed to his discredit. You are prejudiced because the Dom favored you with the green star on your Blade insignia, you are blinded by gratitude. This struggle will not cease while he lives."

"There are grievances, true. But not serious, nor really worth their lives!"

"Freedom can seem worth many lives, and long have these Felarnese wanted rule by a family of their own blood, their own race. He fended them off with his cousins, with the Green Wing of the Tal—and they hate the Tal, even if the Wing is beautiful, she can never win them over truly."

"Stand here, when the bird of war screams from our discs! This traitor stirs, we have to leave or deal with him."

The pair moved off toward the door, even as the man on the floor lifted his head, his face rapt with thought. He had overheard and understood where it was they went, and who they were. He had been told only to kill the man, now two were to be dealt with. Well, it was news the Blades considered the Tal of their own party! The fools!

* * *

VANUE'S VOICE blended with the skirl of the Sendal dance music from the pipes of the revelers, as she murmured:

"Note, Mion, how the thoughts of these peoples turn to struggle as the serpent tide of oncoming space dust thickens about their worlds. The fangs of the serpent head only touch the five planets, and already the once

unified races split and prepare for struggle. Kind against kind, mind against mind—the dis-illusion strikes error deep into all the thought pattern. Death-dealing WAR only can come of their thought, for such is the error! Magnetically the splitting of all the planned unity occurs even as it is pictured in the mind screens within the brains ignorant of the cause of such thoughts. It is simple when one observes afar as we are doing, but it is impossible to avoid the error when the mind itself and those of all about suffer from the sundering repellant magnetism from the ions of decay brought by the flow from space."

Mion scarce heard the voice of her, blending as it did with the scene through which the two Blades pushed, angling toward the far bottleneck where the crystal-clear dome of the Keep gave on the air-locks that kept out of the cold of the sunless world.

KAL HARN followed close on the heels of the tall lithe girl; Amazon-strong gleaming-sheathed in smooth green syntha-skin.

Kal tried hard to avoid contact with the untainted bodies about him, keeping the stricken arm under his cloak, letting the girl ahead make path. The fear of giving the plague etched his face with lines of worry. None knew the cause or how it spread. Only they knew that remorselessly it struck—

After the two darted the tall, lean, dark-faced Felarn spy, his whole appearance foreign here among the blue-haired Nines, off-shoot as they were of Meloa's own race of Node. He must not lose sight! Freedom from the Dom, independence for his race—hung upon letting no Blade move unattended. Had not the Green Wing promised? The Cranes would not fail

her. They could not, once that ally was lost, only defeat would be theirs!

Kal Harn, head turning constantly to avoid contact, caught a glimpse of the dark, intent face. He whirled, leaped, drew back his arm. His fist lashed out, landing high on the swarthy cheek-bone. The man staggered. Kal brought his right up from the ground, but the spy swayed easily outside, and came back with two swift blows to his face, blinding Kal.

Kal gave him elbows, to keep him off till his eyes cleared. The angry plague spot on his arm throbbed painfully, reminding him he might be dooming this man to the same fate—but he buried the thought. The spy brought up a knee that found the pit of his stomach. Harn reeled back, and the man's fist crashed again and again to his face in swift fury. Then, he saw again clearly, and blocked a blow, catching it on the palm of his hand. He fainted with his left, the arm that hurt now terribly. The spy ducked the expected blow, and Harn blasted his right to the jaw with everything he had. The bones seemed to give, the man crumpled, caught himself, sagged to one knee, holding his face. Merciless, Kal slugged him twice on the temple and he sprawled unconscious. Kal stood there, nursing his bleeding knuckles.

He hated that throbbing spot on his arm. Why, why, he wondered? Why death for the Blades? Just what did the Felarnese mean by following, by attacking a Blade? One would have thought the man would have given up after the first attempt failed. They must have been given orders to kill or follow to destination all Blades—to follow until they knew where they could be found by a force sufficient to kill them. But what did they expect to gain by killing a few Blades? They were too many for

such tactics to eliminate them soon enough to save the Felarnese from their vengeance. Kal shrugged the problem off as Meloa tugged at his sleeve.

CHAPTER TWO

OUTSIDE THE Keep, the still stars blazed afar, the naked rock reared black and stark, streaked with the silver of ancient ice unmelted.

Kal and Meloa ran in long leaps, their muscles were strained in the gravity of Gran Jac, as were all the Blades during their youth. The gravity of this lesser satellite Dornoon was slight compared to that of Gran Jac or even of Node.

On the left, in the sky, the vast black round that was Gran Jac hung like the mysterious home of giants of the darkness that it was. A tremendous round scarred shield, dotted here and there with the great dull red gems that were the cities of the giant men of Gran Jac.

Beside Gran Jac moved visibly the tiny brilliant marble that was Felarn, rapid in its orbit, and farther on the broad sweet green round of Node, gemmed with the sapphires that were cities, and hung about with the golden rayed fires of the heat spheres. The other satellite of Gran Jac was hidden by the bulk of Dornoon beneath their feet.

In his heart, Kal felt a swift pulse of longing for the sweet air of Node, cleaned as it was by the white leaves of the pale trees that grew there only.

For Node, the mother of both the Nines and the Nodes, had long ago been warmed by the heat spheres set aswing above her by the father of science.

Node alone had natural air and plants, unlike the more backward Gran Jac and the satellites.

The secret of powering the heat

spheres had been kept by the ancient Doms of Node. One more rankling issue—that secret—perhaps the paramount cause of the recent turbulence.

Even as Kal stared up nostalgically at the dim green glow of Node, the weakness struck him!

He fell, cracking his head globe against the black rocks. Meloa, with no time to think, for air gushed instantly from the long fissure in the plastic, picked him up in her two arms and ran on, hardly missing a stride. His weight was no great burden here.

Frantically she turned the dial set in the round lock face of the space. Bundled Harn in, swung shut the heavy metal, snapped the dogs, pulled down the air lever. Unscrewed his broken head-piece, threw it aside, raised his head:

"Kal, speak! Speak to me, darling!"

Listening for his breath, faint it was and weak, but stronger breath by breath. He sighed, moved his stricken arm.

"I've got to take off, Kal," panted Meloa. "There may be others, now that they know us. Only the carnival law forbidding weapons saved us. I'll strap you in. We have to report, and then you're for the Med-center."

Kal struggled to his feet with her help, staggered to his acceleration cradle, lay half unconscious while she strapped him in, pneumo-pads tight about him.

"Melo, I'm done. I don't like the outlook, better it might be if you turned in your Blade sign. Give up your commission—return to your home. There is some vile mystery about this sudden rising of the Clans, of the Felarnese, of the Gran Jac Ultimatum to the Dom. He cannot win, and only a fool gives allegiance to a fool. How the Dom got himself into this, I know not, nor how he can retrieve anything. Get out, while there

is time! I cannot help you!"

Meloa touched his hot face with the tips of her fingers. "Don't think of it, Kal. Forget the struggle and get well. I will do what seems best."

"I don't trust the Dom, long ago I learned that about him that is not to be mentioned. Long as I have served him loyally, still I have always known there was reason to doubt him."

Kal tried to go on talking, but his voice trailed off weakly, his eyes closed. Meloa darted forward to the controls, snapped the pads tight about the pilot seat, pulled back the throttle. The center jet roared, the black dark outside was lashed with a great whip of glaring yellow light as the little ship curved steeply up, swung in a long turn and arrowed away toward the gemmed green disc of distant Node.

* * *

BENEATH THE Palace of the Triple Dome, there was a retreat known to few, built centuries ago by the first Dom of Node. Cut from the solid rose-granite on which the three towers rested, a long low-arching tunnel of a room, the harsh rock yet unsoftened even by the spilled luxury of furs and hung tapestries. The soft body of the old Dom was ill at ease, always, here.

It was a warrior's room, and the Dom was no warrior, the blood of the Doms had run thin long ago. If, in truth, he was of the Blood. Even that had been whispered of him.

He sat, wearily turning the pages of a worn leather-bound volume, listening to the increasing stir with a worried ear. Sounds from the palace chambers above were brought down here by a speaking tube, cunningly contrived to augment even a whisper to audible volume. Many a secret plot he had spied upon from this place,

with his ears only, given thus power to hear in all the important rooms of the palace.

The time was almost at hand, and he must reveal to these simple-minded followers of his the truth of their predicament. Would they retain their ancient loyalty, or turn and flee, leaving him defenseless to face the long-gathering wrath?

Idly his still-bright eyes ran over the dull type, reading:

"For an age the black skinned giant race of Gran Jac held all dominance, all rule, over the five planets. And no man knows how long this was true, for the giants destroyed the written records of the smaller races of the satellites. But in those days, every city dome raised its own food, the warmth provided by localized fires from local power sources. Even oil and coal were brought and burned, even into historic times this work of mankind was paramount, mining fuel and raising food kept the energies of man directed only to the creating of gardens that they might live. And the great size of Gran Jac races made them unequaled in battle, and a harsh rule they exercised—taking the little people off to the great domes of Gran Jac to labor or to die. And many did die, before their muscles hardened to the great weight of the planet.

Then, after all that dark time, came the man named Enuj Ra, who ingeniously created the first fire-globe of undying warmth, and set it aswing above the dead cold round of his planet, our own mother Node. At first the men of Gran Jac laughed at the pretty toy, but the people of Node, overjoyed at the possibilities, helped Enuj Ra create more and bigger fire-globes and tow them into their orbits above Node. Gradually the warmth spread, the air became atmosphere instead of ice, plants began to appear—and the men of Gran Jac came to

superintend the planting of the whole planet for their food.

But Enuj Ra was proven truly a genius, then. He hid himself away, and upon the arrival of the great ships of Gran Jac, he turned the master switch, and each fire globe went instantly out, in the sky above. Raging were the giants to learn that no food would they get from the new power unless Node was given freedom. Searching and tumult filled Node, as they sought out the genius—but find him they did not...

"Enuj Ra," murmured the Dom. "If your shade had the power, he could do another good turn tonight.

CALMLY THE old Dom, of the blood of Enuj Ra himself, read on. Overhead the muffled sound of the gathering grew, and his ears counted the slow sound of the chronodisc gear.

"Thus by secrecy insuring the dominance of the people of Node over all races of the five planets, having in his hands complete control over the new and so-needed food supply, Enuj Ra bided his time. Ten cycles of fruitful food production must go by, the multiplying mouths fed by the new abundance must grow into manhood. Enuj Ra waited, and at the proper time, dominance was assured because all the races of the five planets must have the food that Node produced. Then Enuj Ra again shut off the power of the fire-globes, and announced that unless a treaty accepted and favorable to all of the five planets was agreed upon by the giant blacks of Gran Jac—there would be no more food from Node.

Thus our great forebear brought about the existence of the Triple Crown, based upon the possession of the food supply by Node, and since that day no military action has been

taken without the signature of the regnant Dom of Node..."

The old man sighed, put up the worn volume. He took up the Triple Crown from where it blazed green and gold upon a pillow of scarlet, and set it on his greying head. He took up the gold crook, set with the sign of the Teyna, the ancient bird of war of Node. He muttered:

"Now must I tell them that the day of peace is past, and our hold upon the life-line, the bread and fruit of the five planets—is broken and gone, and again the men of Node must accept the slave collars of the men of Gran Jac."

He stood for a time, gazing into a gaping burnt place in the solid stone of the wall. Short nads ago, one turning of Gran Jac upon its axis—that hole had been a door of ancient impermeable metal, inviolate, shielding with its unsolvable locking dials the formulas of the Fire Globe, just as they had been placed there by the dying Enuj Ra.

"Which of those I have welcomed here, could it have been?" muttered the Dom, touching the ragged fragments of burnt metal and splintered rock. "There were but four knew what it contained. My two sons, Reb Ra and Naj Ra, they are on Gran Jac, at the training schools. That leaves two—The Green Star and the Green Wing of the Dal. Brother and sister—heirs by blood—what advantage would they win in possessing the secret? Do they desire this crown so much they would plunge the four lesser planets again into slavery to the giant men? What could Gran Jac offer them, greater than they have? Some value beyond my thinking..." The old man moved on, to face his followers.

THE VOICE of Vanue, saying in that more than human warmth that was hers above all others:

"Note that in the past there was struggle and war, that the cause of its cessation has seemed to be a treaty brought about by pressure on the greatest need in life—food.

"Yet, in truth, there must have been in that earlier time another tide of disintegrant force ions, and that tide's ending coincided with events that brought about peace. That peace has lasted until in the circling currents, the log serpent-tide of Dee touches the five planets once again. Now events and their reactions interpret to their again distorted errant mind patterns only to mean—war!"

Mion nodded. "Yes, the pattern is directly opposite! If the cause of their war was real and logical, it would have been started by Enuj Ra's denial of their right to the new power and warmth—yet, contrarily, peace resulted. Now, in this new advent of the tide of Dee, the publicizing of the formulas so that all the five planets may enjoy the warmth of the heat-spheres, that seem to them cause for new warfare springing up among them. In reality, it should make for peace, since it will reduce the pressure of necessity and bring about greater plenty for all of them if new areas are brought into food production."

"Thus is always the face of error, illogic setting forth as logic, and finding acceptance..."

Vanue's voice, when it ceased, left always a poignant longing for yet another and another sound of its beauty.

Mion's eyes and ears tore their attention from the brief, intense delight of Vanue's self, from the ringing, thrilling sound and dizzying sight of her too-great life. He bent again to the thought cloud, where that other

world of color and light and life was again displaying a new facet.

THE GREEN WING, Queen of the Tal, greatest of the clans of the Nines, swept across the ball-room on the arm of Verde Cire, the Genode of all the Blades. The two Teyna wings, dyed green, ancient symbol of the leaders of the Tal, spread proud and high above her nobly chiseled head.

Unlike the races of the Nodes, her skin was only faintly gold, and her hair so pale a blue as to gleam like silver—falling to her shoulders in metallic waves, there caught in a net of emeralds. Beneath the emerald mesh, her pale shoulders glittered with a fine dusting of metal powder. Her high proud breasts thrust from a nest of small green feathers, feathers that sheathed the strong arches of her hips and swept downward to end at her feet in long fronds. A wide leathern belt, worked over with the Dal symbols of the trident crossed on a blade set between the two wings, circled her waist. Her feet were cased in open-work gold leather sandals. She danced with a sleepy indolent grace, seeming to hold the tall Verde stiff with awe and worship of her.

The lesser lights of the Blade organization danced too, seeming to leave always a circle inviolate where the Green Wing and their own appointed head, Verde Cire, danced as alone upon the floor.

Or they clustered in small whispering groups, their faces intent and thoughtful, unmindful of the setting for gayety. Thus it was not a ball, so much as a necessary prelude to something far more important than dancing—and some occupied their feet with the dance, but only that time might pass.

The musicians, nested in a great couch slightly screened by the pale

fronds of the white fern, played muted, soft melodies of love and indolence, seeming to wait too, holding in all exuberance, as if the occasion was too funereal to let joy flow from the long golden horns, or humming harp to rise to triumph above human thought, or drum to beat too loudly and so distract the coming event with unseemly noise.

The Dom, peering out from his peep-hole behind the rostrum under the white fern, felt the waiting and the worry, knew that some word had spread—that all there waited for something like a death.

But the Enode had struck moments ago, and the Dom stepped up to the main dais and held up his hand.

The music ceased, the dancers stood in their places, and silence fell.

Expectant, somehow grotesque and faintly horrible silence.

All eyes centered on the withered, weary, but still cunning-eyed and quick-handed Dom. The eyes roved from his goodly, gold chain draped paunch to his wide stooped shoulders and gloomy face—and then politely looked elsewhere, waiting. Or examined the embroidery, rich on the wide sleeves, or speculated on the meaning of the cryptic symbols bordering his wide collar—and did not look twice at his face.

"My countrymen, you who have been chosen from among the finest of the young Nodes, trained and made ready for long years for the tasks the future might bring—My own brave Blades, I have to tell you that the greater task has come. The time is NOW—our Fate is upon us!"

He stopped, and his little cunning eyes swept here and there, looking for effect, waiting for question, estimating, putting off... Then he pursed his lips, bent forward, gripped the sides of the flat-topped rostrum, and

in a shrill whisper that broke in his throat yet went on audibly:

"The ancient formula of the heat-sphere has been raped from its shrine, the power is gone from the race of the Node!"

FOR MOMENTS the silence grew, until no sound but slow tension rising could be heard. A slow increasing rustle, as of wind, of breath caught and slowly released against the will, grew until the swift whispering murmurs broke forth, then the Dom raised his narrow red hand again.

"The task you have been trained for is now upon you! Recover the secret before all power is gone from the Node, before once again our race is in thrall to a greater, made to serve and to slave and to be—never free again!"

The Dom now turned his eyes upon the Green Wing, where she stood close before the rostrum, where he had purposely halted the dance that she would be caught there before him.

"Only two beside myself upon all our globe knew where the plates of the secret formula were kept. Those two were the Green Wing and the Green Star of the Tal Clan!"

The old man stepped back, delivered of his shaft, to watch the effect.

As if propelled by a spring, the Green Wing swirled feather light to the rostrum, sprang upon the dais behind, faced the startled, accusing faces of the Blades.

"Your old Dom does not know of what he speaks. Think you Gran Jac has waited without effort all these long nads, waited for lifetimes—without sending even one hireling spy to seek out our secret? Nay, it is no time to turn accusing our friends, to set our own blood against blood. Time instead to test the temper of our Blades in action!"

The Wing paused, gazed for an in-

stant at the old Dom as if weighing his utter worthlessness—then went on. Meloa, entering from the darkness heard her, and marveled at her manner, for she suspected very strongly she was behind the Felarnese activity, felt that she was plotting treason against them all...yet one would think she herself was the very heart-blood of loyalty and honor.

"We must use our strength now, to make our future more secure than any hidden paper and old man's political manoueuvering ever made it secure. Enuj Ra could well have been the death of every soul on Nòde when he denied the formulas to the Blacks of Gran Jac! But we were lucky, and they were condescending and lenient, let us have our way. They gave us our chance, and it is not dead because some thief in the night broke an ancient safe-box! We are alive and free, let us make the most of it, swift and sure welding all the clans, all our might—into one strong weapon, picking out the joint in the armor of our rising adversity and striking deep to the heart, now! Before the thought of our fall becomes reality, and our own fears make us slave!"

Her high, keen thrilling voice fell from very effort to a husky, throaty, persuasiveness as she went on:

"Listen to the Dom, bow down to the Triple Crown, and fail to take the immediate action necessary. All will then be lost, as Your Dom expects already. It is no time to listen to words of defeat and fright and indecision! It is no time to turn the Blades against the Tal, we are one blood. We are knit by ties too great to sunder with one word of accusation!"

Meloa, shoving forward, shouted clear above the rising tumult:

"Let the Dom speak, let us hear first his purpose. No treason without cause!"

THE DOM, feeling impotent and a little ridiculous, and sure that his suspicion of the Wing and the Tal was the result of an aging brain, stepped forward close beside the quivering, angrily trembling gown of green feathers. As the silence fell, he spoke, his eyes upon the flushed lovely face of his cousin.

"What could the Gran Jac offer the Tal that we can not offer? —That was my thought when suspicion in my old mind turned to the Green Wing and her brother, the Star of the Tal. Do they want the Triple Crown enough to barter the freedom of us all for the bauble?"

The old man eyed the Green Wing, and the still mass of faces, his eyes holding an infinite depth, a strange sensation of hidden nobility of purpose passed from him to each one.

"Even if that is true, there is a solution! I do not think it is true, and from this day it must never be considered true by any of us. Whether her brother or herself has had a hand in this thievery I very much doubt—they would not be here. But, that there may be nothing dear to them with-held by us, that they may be bound to us indissolubly—their own fate linked inextricably to our own—in full appreciation of their value to all of us as the leaders they unquestionably are—to hold them forever firm in their intelligence I give what is most precious to myself and I hope to all here tonight, The Triple Crown!"

So saying, hardly knowing how or why he did this deed, but feeling that he was utterly unprepared to meet the crisis, the old man lifted the green-gemmed triple ring of gleaming gold from his head, and with every grace in the motion, set it upon the blue-silver hair of the Green Wing! It rested there above her as-

tounded face as if wholly made for her—and a deep sigh went up from all present—a sigh of strange and mingled emotions.

"I am an old man, cousin. You are young and brilliant, your abilities have been demonstrated over and over. Men will follow and obey you without question. I have long thought upon this act, and now the act is forced upon me, if the good of all is to be served. Rule for that ideal, the good of all, even as Enuj Ra worked and ruled—and avert this coming blood-shed!"

The Green Wing, her voice low and bemused with effort to understand the reasons behind the act, murmured:

"My brother, and your two sons, all set aside—in my favor? Why? Why, Naja Ra, do you do this thing to yourself and to the rightful heirs?"

"Because tonight, if ever it was in my life, my vision is clear and my thought uncorrupted. You are the life shaped to the need that arises before us. Later when the trouble is past and forgotten, then can the rightful possession be discussed at law, until all are weary enough of the problem to accept the judgment. Just now, we need your vital accurate thought, your instant decision, action directed completely toward the heart of the trouble. I have made my own action in that direction, for I myself have been the unwitting cause of some dissension among us. You can draw the clans into one, draw the Nodes to the Nines, and lash them into action beside the Tal. Court the favor of the Felarnese, and spend hours making jokes with the Genpoint of the Gran Jac legions. Be a Monarch, toy with these war-mongering sons of perdition, and so doing weld the five worlds again into one!"

CHAPTER III

MELOA T left the Three Towered Dome with strange emotions and angers mingling, fit to choke her. How could that young too-beautiful minx hope to hold the reins of the Blades, the fierce Tal clans, the conflicting groups of both the Nines and the Nodes, and still court the Felarnese from their ancient and now again active enmity? The old Dom, whom she understood and loved, must have lost his wits, been distracted by her beauty and vitality, been childishly influenced by an old man's whim.

But she had her mission, and her loyalty was to the Triple Crown, whoever wore it. If the Dom thought the Green Wing capable, and it meant the death or defeat of them all—there was nothing she could do about it now.

Outside the warm air of the dome, the soft night of Node closed down chill, the warmth of the floating heat-spheres was shut down to minimum, the temperature fallen to below comfort. The leaves of the pale trees were folded like buds against the cold. The tame cats of Node wailed among the trees, mating and fighting and sounding like ghouls arguing over a corpse.

Meloa shivered, sped along to the speedy Blade guard-ship that was her personal charge now—with Kal Harn sick to death in the medical dome.

About her slim waist was now a strong band of plain leather, and in the scabbard close riveted to the belt hung a flame-blade, incongruous in its grim efficient deadliness against her soft curved thigh. War hung above them all, and the day when weapons were forgotten or ignored was gone.

All that practice the Blades had regarded as play without ever expecting any genuine need—now Meloa

knew it had not been play, but needed preparation for disaster.

The ship lifted, swung in a short arc, blasted close beneath a softly glowing heat globe, powered with the same mysterious, self-fueling, exhaustless mystery of science as the flame-blade against her waist. This was the Blades one great advantage—they had the flame blade, and no sword ever built could stand against the steel-melting flame the old Enuj Ra had given their race against all others.

Even the Nines and the Tal had not the flame-blades. Idly Meloa wondered what would be done about that if they allied against—perhaps the giants of Gran Jac themselves could not face the flame-blades. It was not yet known, they had never been used in a major conflict.

The old Dom had killed any possibility of war between the Tal and the Nodes. Remained the Nines, the Felarnese and the terrific strength of the giant Gran Jac race of blacks. With the Tal and the Nodes welded by the Green Wings double identity as hereditary Queen of the Tal, and as selected Dom of the Nodes—would they act now concertedly to oppose them before they grew yet greater?

The ship burned across the cold sky toward the giant dull sheen of the Gran Jac. 'Melo to Gran Jac, to the Temple itself and learn there, what was intended and what was prophesied' were her orders.

She settled softly, jets silent, between the two great bulks of Mt. Malor and Mt. Rak. Left her ship in the ever-shadow of a crevice. Crept across the ragged rock face to level going—swung in a long stride toward the great dome of the old City of the Temple of the Way.

STRANGE religion, these giants, mused Melo. Believed that a

body had a soul and the souls went to a grey place of mists after death! That a grey King ruled there, still and all-knowing, among the drifting shades of his subjects. His Queen was supposed to be black as a carbon electrode, and to sit motionless beside him—forever. Both alive only in the mind, the Palace of their Thought where they welcomed the souls of the dead!

Within the ancient, weathered face of the Temple within the Dome, was a hole in the great natural rock over which the temple had been built long ago. This hole was said to be the only existant portal to the Land of Death from the Land of Life.

And the only exit from the Land of Death!

Once each Dan, thirty cycles apart—a being came from the black hole and told them of the future of the black race of Gran Jac. And returned again to the Land of the Dead.

Melo shrugged, smiling a little at the giant's belief in anything so ridiculous and gloomy.

But the giant race invariably fulfilled the prophecy. Whether by coincidence or because of belief causing implicit carrying out of the prophecy as an order—one could pretty well gauge the future activity* of the Gran Jac giants by listening with care to the oracle of the Temple of the Gateway.

Melo meant to hear it, and it returned again in two nads,—time left now only to get there and make a way within the Temple, with luck. She must not miss the oracle, or the Gran Jacs might act before the new Dom learned of its import.

If the oracle said war, war it would be, whether they had enemies to fight or had to attack some friend. It was only recent times the Oracle had prophesied peace. Since Enuj Ra had stymied them and made the priests

of the Temple see the light behind the Heat-spheres, Meloa reasoned.

She eased up to the ten foot round of the corroded metal of the air-lock. Nervously she fingered her helmet lugs, she wanted to get it off and grin at the big nine-foot black guard she knew waited inside. He could be a trouble, or he could be friendly and ignoring of formalities. There was no time for checking of credentials, though she had them all in order.

With a vast hiss of air, the big round twisted sideways, she slipped through the widening slot quickly, tugged off the lugs, threw back her already steaming helmet. She smiled her best smile at the wide, sullenly inscrutable face of the giant, and after a second, the infectious gayety of her youth struck home, and he grinned. The huge teeth of him startled Meloa, she had not been on Gran Jac for near a dan. Fierce, homely people, they were good hearted enough ordinarily, but terrible in anger.

"Here for the opening of the Way?"

"Aye, big one, I must see the path I will tread when I get as homely as you, and die for shame of it!" Meloa purred the jest and taunt in her best Gran Jac jargon, a tongue with little in common with her own.

His smile disappeared for an instant, then he saw that she meant the impossible, for such a beauty was not passing here every day.

"When you get as homely as myself, the world will have decayed about us into mist, little butterfly. If you must wait to that day, you will never die."

"Perhaps I am the shade of some dead woman, returning to enter along the way when it opens for the sooth of the Day of Truth."

His face sobered again, and he looked at her closely, and over his shoulder fearfully.

"Do not jest, little Blade, the ears of the men who serve the way are never closed. You are no shade, but flesh and blood. Get on with you, and on your return, tell me of the word."

MELOA pushed open the inner door, sliding it silently in its ancient worn grooves, her heart beating thanks that no Ware orders had gone out. Evidently the big race had taken the rumours of trouble as froth and nonsense, or had already the secret firmly in their hands and feared no event.

Along the wide, gloomy streets she padded rapidly, avoiding contact with the great-bodied natives. Her cloak hid the flame-blade as it had hid it from the guard, but a touch would reveal it. Not that it wasn't legal, as their agreements went. But not tonad, of all nads, would one wear weapon but for fear of ones deed finding one out.

Into the vast doorway of the Temple of the Portal of Death. Past the gloomy swathed forms of the stone "watchers", past the gigantic mounted figure of the First Warrior King. Under the Arch of the Tortured Captives, their writhing forms of stone wreathing up and around in one symphony of sculptured pain and ugly triumph. Along the Corridor of Silence, where the little green-lit wall niches held the Nee candles, burning with sweet fragrance, and the tiny witched images of the lost Elves.

Then she was around the two tall armed guardians of the portal of the Chamber of the Way, and among the silent gigantic figures of the waiting black worshippers. Eagerly she slipped forward past the columnar legs, making her way almost to the throne where the Genpoint himself waited on his throne of black adamant, set with blood rubys in the ancient skull pattern of the Gens alone.

The throne faced the thirty foot ragged rock opening where the empty round well slanted steeply from the rugged slope of natural rock against which the temple had been erected.

The Opening of the Way was almost due, she had cut the time shorter than she intended. The blackness of the depths of the pit within the jagged round of the cave mouth was already adrift with subtle grey streamers of mist—which always preceded the approach of the Ghost from the world of beyond.

The awe and the conveyed implicit belief of these giant people in their cavern ghost struck through the armor of unbelief shielding Meloa from fear of the coming spirit, and for a moment she was sure she was wrong. Sure that a living ghost from the land of the dead was really about to appear!

The drifting mist began to circle slowly, centering in a kind of grey whirlpool, and the funneling center of the whirl deeped to a long tunnel, a tunnel suggesting infinite depth, and as subtle and no less infinite, a sinister peril.

Far, far off a figure appeared, visible only through the center of the web of mist—and the figure grew swiftly as if rushing like the wind from distances too vast for mortal mind to grasp.

Meloa wondered if it were not mirror tricks by those who held the giant race in thrall to their wits? Wondered, too, fearfully and simply if this were not the truth—a visitation from the world beyond all death!

QUITE suddenly the web of mist was blasted as by terrific power, swept invisibly aside, and standing there at the center of the rugged circle of age-worn rock facets was a tall, thin-robed greyness.

The bone-thing face was grey of

skin, the long too articulate hands were surely only grey bones...

Woman or man, Meloa couldn't know surely. Only that it was death, incarnate, terrible, she shuddered away from her first view of the Opening of the Way!

The fear of the awful reality of death and life-beyond-death yet more horrible than death itself struck into Meloa's young mind. She tottered as any girl might do, fell suddenly into the dark vortice of unconsciousness—a fainting spell which all her training and hardening and experienced will could not fight off.

What happened then she did not see or know, but it was not good.

As her falling body struck the rough grey stone of the floor, her cape fell aside, and even as her flame-blade was revealed to the startled, back-pushing giants near her—the twisting handle released the terrible power of the pale flame!

The flame lanced out in a long deadly path of terrific heat. The force shield of the handle coils protected Meloa's body. But it did not protect the feet of the giants beside her, and they leaped and screamed and bellowed as the flame reached among them, moving in an arc of twenty feet at the tip of the lance of fire as Meloa's body settled and rolled over.

Then both fallen girl and burning blade lay there, eclipsing entirely the gloomy glory of the grey shade from beyond the edge of life.

As that blade burned; burned there in the Temple where no weapon was ever allowed to be borne, and upon the body of an alien and a guest of trust—the anger of the giant Genpoint on his throne was terrible to see.

His voice did not dare to speak out his anger, for it was time and more for the words of the sacred oracle standing there about to speak!

But his anger *could* find vent, a vent acceptable to the Lord of Death-land himself!

The Genpoint got to his feet, gigantic even among those giants, a ten footer of incredible musculature among even this race adjusted to a life upon a dense and large planet.

Fiercely, silently, moving with the burning force of rage—his violated sanctuary and his insulted emissary from the Grey Land of Death watching him—he bent, shut off the flame, picked up the body of the unconscious girl. As his assembled people gasped he bore the slight drooping figure to the very mouth of the dread cavern. There he lay her at the feet of the waiting agent of death and bowed to the very floor, asking pardon with the ancient gestures that are used where no man dare speak.

Silence, filled with the sense of justice swift and entire. The tall thin greyness began then to speak, the terrific meaning of the ancient words from the back of time rolled out over the Chamber of the Way into Death.

Softly the stylus of the Genpoint glided over his waxed pad, as he noted down each character spoken out by the oracle.

The words ended, the grey thin terrible death-in-life stooped, plucked up the small self of Meloan T, down swirled the grey mist of time and space and swift distance. The grey figure receded down the tunnel of grey impossible mist and Meloan was gone upon the journey into the land of the dead.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GREEN Wing smiled as she stood to greet the Genpoint of all Gran Jac. Himself honoring her with this visit to learn the truth about all the rumours of war—as well as to explain the incident which had caused

the sending of a member of the Blades to the Land of the Unliving.

Skillfully she led the talk, parrying his questions even while getting answers to her own probing as to the plans of the Council of Gran Jac. Of his inability to handle her the great black warrior was soon well aware, his broad ugly face dewed with the moisture of effort, his eyes holding on hers like a great beast fascinated by the antics of some bright plumaged bird.

VANUE'S voice came to Mion faintly, explaining. *"Note that immediately behind the head of the serpent tide the space dust thins and almost there is none. Note that the portion of the tide of the dis flow passing the five planets now is this same tenuous portion, and that the thin-ness of the tide of dis coincides with the suddenly repaired pattern of their life. The Dom of Node generously gave his crown to the person best fitted to receive it, she bends every effort to unite the dissident nations into one peaceful state, abandoning meanwhile her ill-conceived, and treacherous plot to ally the Tal clans with the Felarnese, and the giants of Gran Jac send a peaceful emissary, their own official leader appointed by their council—to the Nodes, to learn if they can avert war."*

"I observe the coincidence of the subsidence of the dis-tide with the subsidence of the war-like activity," answered Mion.

"Note that the thicker body of the serpent tide moves closer to the five planets inexorably. Watch how their passions and events answer the growth of the oncoming flow. Soon they will be swallowed up in the body of the serpent, their true thought obscured will launch them into wars they will be unable to reason out a way to avoid. It is inevitable

that untrained minds should succumb to such unseen influences."

Vanue turned and touched the now sleeping Firko with a caressing fingertip. He did not awaken, but only smiled and murmured her name, sliding lower on the couch. She pillowed his head against her arm, and turned the thought spool to a faster tempo.

The deadly wide body of the serpent flow of disintegrant dust moved now swiftly, swallowing up the five planets into the thickness of its body.

"What is this Land of the Dead into which poor Melo was taken?" asked Mion.

"You will see there a strange pair indeed. They are abandoned children of the past, their inherited science enough to keep life in them—not enough to keep off other effects of De such as you already know about. One of them has become a wholly evil form of degenerate parasitism, the other a passive despairing passenger upon the will of Fate, moving no finger to halt the course of events. Observe them closely, for one day you will find within your own body the effects of unobserved quantities of dis, and that day you will know better than to choose flight and isolation, as this pair did."

Vanue softly turned up the amplification, and Mion slipped again into the unconscious state of complete absorption in the course of events.

THE GENPOINT of all Gran Jac strode purposefully through the great portal of the three towered Palace of the Dom of Node. In his hand he held an ultimatum received from the Council of the Planet he represented, and his face was grim, though his heart misgave him. He read it through to the Green Wing once, then tucked it away in his breast.

The Green Wing waved away the

three officers of the Blades with whom she had been conferring before his arrival. They had reported to her on the ineffectual effort to recover or learn the whereabouts of the secret of the heat-spheres.

She stood stiffly, hardly nodding to the giant Genpoint, for she knew the council was under his thumb and this his doing. She could read on his face as he read that this was his decision after his long talks with her, and anger flamed within her that all her effort to reconcile him had gone for nothing. She listened with scant attention as he read, her face stony, her eyes moving everywhere but to his face, again.

Now the play-talk of the past days was over. She guessed that he had carried this paper just as it was now in his bosom when he first came—had now decided to deliver it to her orally.

His words fell gloomy and with a dull finality upon her, echoing over and over in her mind as if written there forever:

"To the most Honorable Dom, Green Wing of the Tal, Queen of all the Nodes. It is requested that your people must agree to turn over the formulas for the warming fire-globes without more delay. If you refuse, action will be taken by the warrior chiefs of the Gran Jac. Too long have we humored your people while this needed thing was withheld, no more can we suffer this evil."

There was more, formal signatures, directions as to how the formulas were to be delivered—

When he had finished, tucked it loosely into his uniform jacket, the Green Wing held out her hand, he strode with one great step to her dais, laid it in her hand. She said:

"There is no need for this! You must know we cannot turn over to you what we no longer possess. Why don't

you help us search for them, if you do not already have them?"

The Genpoint recoiled that full stride in surprise. Anger and complete distrust of her strove to cover his face, he put them aside visibly.

"I had decided that the theft of the formulas was but a rumour, when your worship did not speak of it to me. I cannot understand that they are not in your possession. How could it have occurred here at the center of the Blade's watchfulness?"

The Green Wing eyed him coldly. He did not express contrition for nearly calling her a liar. He only stood, awaiting the answer to the ultimatum from the powers he served, and sometimes ruled.

With an effort she controlled her anger, smiled slowly and gestured with her hand.

"If we cannot give you the secret of the spheres of heat, how then can we avoid war, my noble ambassador?"

"It would not be a war, small one! It would be too bad, that is all!"

"Already you slip into the uncouth ways of the warrior, insulting me, calling me a liar and 'small one'—and you expect an honorable answer to a message such as you bear me. What do you really expect—treatment of your person that will serve as cause for war? The thing has been stolen from us, come, I'll show you the vaults."

As they stood within the ancient lair of the Doms of old, before the blasted vault doors—the Genpoint gave her answer:

"If ever the warriors of Gran Jac learn that this has been contrived to make fools of us—that day you can expect attack. Until then, I will hold the dogs of war in leash."

He stalked out, and the Green Wing sighed with vast relief. She had expected the worst.

VANUE murmured to Mion:

"Note here how great events are controlled by un-noticed influences. If they had remained above the surface of the earth, the flow of magnetic evil force full about their minds, they would have parted in complete anger and discord. But they left the surface, descended here below the rocks where much of the incoming magnetism is obstructed and neutralized by the still unimpregnated rocks above the chambers of the Dom—and their anger cooled, the Genpoint departed without deciding upon war."

"I note the incident, and the reason for it," answered Mion. "It was not the burst vault alone."

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCATENATION of terrifying silent noise; swift, vibrant motion of rushing forces soundlessly pressing on and on. A terrible emotion-racking sensation of death from the thing that bore her...

Meloa awoke to find herself frozen in the weird embrace of that which could not be, but was. Frozen, motionless-in-motion, still yet with swift on-sweeping silence that was ear-racking with a pressure that should have been sound and was not! Fear an icy torrent of crawling cold in the bowels, on her back, up her neck—she shrieked once, and stopped—she could not hear the sound!

On went the thing, and poor Meloa held her breath, closed her eyes, and after a time, fell mercifully again into another faint.

BACK upon the worried little world of Node, young Kal Harn came in a short time to the point of inevitable death—as did all who showed the angry red marks of the plague. He fought back the darkness, crying

out for his sweet Meloan T, weakly—
 “Meloan, come now, where have you gone when I need you most?”

And the slim young nurse-maid pressed his hot body back against the pillows, in desperation telling him: “Your Meloan has already been given to the Grey Prophet of the Way of Death by the Genpoint of Gran Jac. There is no use your crying for her—she will never come again!”

Cruel it was to tell him, but she was driven beyond caring by the many duties for so many stricken by the rapidly spreading plague.

Poor Kal weakened swiftly after that, and knew there was no use nor much sense in wanting to live anyway. But before he died he exacted a promise that he, too, would be laid before the Opening of the Way of Death.

It was done, even as he asked of them. Permission was gained of the priests of the Temple, his body was lain where before only the great black carcasses of their own race had been placed—and the lean grey figure came and bore him down the tunnel of funneling mist.

MELOAN T, when she came to her mind again, found herself lying upon a pale grey bank of moss, and waiting nearby a tall woman, clad in black.

Upon her shoulder sat a great red bird. Of the sky beyond was nothing but a slow whirl of mist, and sometimes glowing ragged rocks showing through the grey mist.

The tall woman stroked her bird, and presently said: “Greetings, little stranger from life. Are there many so attractive as yourself above?”

The bird glared down disapprovingly upon Meloan’s distraught face, and squawked one loud sound of complete disgust.

“Are you a friend?” asked Meloan.
 “In this place I did not expect friend-

ship. What am I to expect here, and how came I to be sent here?”

The woman smiled gloomily; wearily, yet she smiled. “A friend, yes. Expect? You can expect to understand nothing here for a long time—and when you do understand, it is not good.”

“Are you dead? Am I dead?” asked Meloan.

“This is not so dead a land as you might think, little stranger. It is a land of deep and ancient magic, long turned evil, yes. But of death we have only a little out in the open. Most of it is stored away, waiting its use.”

The woman’s voice was very strange and different to Meloan’s ears, who had never met before a human who had been gifted with innumerable years of life. Warm, yet impersonal, slow and rich with much knowing, one wished for that voice after it ceased. Meloan’s eyes sought her face when she spoke, to look for the beauty the voice expressed upon the strange, almost cynically weary face. But the eyes of her always remained veiled and distant, not looking into Meloan’s. Sad eyes, waiting, too full of some past pain, like a memory that would not go away.

“Who are you?” Meloan sometimes asked, awed by some sudden revelation of inhuman wisdom or by her statuesque height, her solemn, distant bearing.

“Names do not matter here, any more, little Meloan. I am one who was here before it became what is now the Land of Death. The changes passed me by, inflicting only pain and not destruction of my self—I hope.”

“Can I stay with you? Till I get used to it, anyway?”

“If you only knew how glad I am that your bright youth has come to me before death touched you!”

“Are you dead? You can’t be dead!

Oh, say it isn't true!"

"You are overwrought, Melo. Of course I'm not dead, though I have often wished to be so. You will understand by and by."

Time went by for Melo, and she could not understand this place or this woman or what possible purpose had been served by her own sending into this strange world. And the woman only smiled when she asked, and told her it was better not to know, for a time.

Then one day, sadly the woman came toward her where she sat by the grey moss-tree where the little pool tinkled from the streams fall. And behind her walked—Kal Harn.

Melo gave a glad cry and flung herself into Kal's arms.

But his arms did not enwrap her in sweet remembering love. He stood like a block of wood!

She raised her face to his, looked into his...dead eyes! Then she screamed, and screamed again. She ran weeping back into the cave of her tall mysterious friend.

After a moment the dead, walking body of Kal followed the tall woman into the cave after Melo.

"It is time now to tell you of this place, and why the dead walk," said the tall woman. Her voice drew Melo from her shocked state, she listened with wide, tear-wet eyes.

"SC IT IS that only the Queen can give life back to your lover," concluded the tall woman. For all the dead who are taken in here are the servants, the stored weapons of the Lord of this world, which he keeps with his knowledge of life in a kind of half-life. He can use them if he ever has to do so, to fight an invading army. But time has done things to him, he is no longer even remotely human. His Queen, she is

of a different stripe. Ask—she knows the way of release. But I have never heard of her defying the Lord and releasing any of his subjects."

"You go to them, you know how to deal with beings such as these. I feel completely helpless."

The woman smiled a rather terrible smile, grim and deep and toothy with a time-worn anger in it.

"I am not allowed to enter their halls, Melo. They know I would kill them if chance offered. You they would not fear, for you could not."

"You mean, they rule, and leave you freedom, knowing you are an enemy?"

"That is but a way of tormenting me, so that I live always for an opportunity that they are sure never will come to me. Hate is not good to live with, and they know... But our ancient feud has nothing to do with you. Go, you might have luck."

IT SAT in gloomy splendor, still, motionless as death itself, in a quiet chill of utterly alien power. The place where IT sat was reminiscent of a King behind the chess pieces. There were no pieces before the deathless King, though the impression of will-less servitors waiting the quiet vast will of IT from the grey throne was inescapable.

Melo shuddered, and waited, too. So this was the Grey Lord, who had held the race of giants of Gran Jac under a spell of fear for centuries—still living! *If it was life* that moved within the cold grey eyes.

The floor of the vast and dismal place bore out the impression of chess. Great squares of black alternated with squares of crimson, waiting for some drama that Melo felt would be to the mind behind those terrible eyes no more important really, than any game of real chess

would be to a mere man. Nor to him to be thought of differently than a game.

Beside him, the still, death-like face of the Queen was a black graven mask. Apparently carved of stone, only her eyes lit with a strange blue fire, burning down upon Melo. Of what race this black-fleshed Queen? With her glowing dark skin like polished ebony, the chiseled, alien features expressionless of all but utter weariness and waiting—for what, Melo wondered?

Beauty she had, a still beauty as if herself was of chaste metal. Delicate, yet utterly hard of expression. Lovely, yet cold with some deadly inner cold. Fragile, yet strong of inner intense hardness. Frighteningly motionless, as if she herself was but a statue set there to stare forever at nothing.

Yet no artist ever carved such timeless repudiation of life's worthless values upon any face. No living artist shaped those nude ebony limbs into exquisite form and polished perfection. Nothing could have formed her but the ages of development behind some ancient alien race forgotten now by all the surface life of Gran Jac. There was an alien and utter perfection in every line of her.

Ageless, yet frozen by a weight of time and some realization of the futility of movement toward known useless goals. Lovely with a delicate chiseled beauty. Cruel, with thin lips drawn about with a harsh and angry line that yet seemed to have an infinite patience and a great wisdom within her softening the seeming cruel face into—a terrible beauty.

THE GREY inhuman man-shaped thing beside her moved, then, after so very long that Melo was sure she had mistaken two statues for liv-

ing beings. Crossed one long sinewed leg encased in gleaming grey silk hose upon one in shining black hose—and motioned Melo closer.

The blue deep eye-fire in the dark eyes of the still Queen flickered angrily as Melo moved closer. It was not a good feeling for Melo, standing there. But it was weirdly, terribly pleasant. Some fire of alien, ancient desire from worlds long past—worlds once filled with terrific, immortal lusts—from some world not human that birthed these creatures long ago, came invisibly from IT like the touch of desiring hands upon her body and those hands not man's hands but the eery touch of an ancient, hoary ghost who yet lived on in undying animal strength.

She knew this was the mind of the Grey one searching her, touching her with some intense tactile sensing of the mind. As she stood before the two of them this unseen yet quite real and felt violation of her body went on, mounting in intensity even as the eye-fire of the dark Queen mounted in anger.

Some vampirish power of the Grey Lord seemed drinking at her young strength! Voluptuously draining her with some space-negating tentacle, absorbing her as if his mouth were at her throat, and her life-blood flowing sweetly out and into him.

Weakening, sickening rapidly, Melo put one hand to her brow, reached for some support with the other. As invisibly as it had come the draining power left her, and as if by way of reward a sudden ecstasy flowed through her. A new and different strengthening mounted within her, and as suddenly her anger flashed out at this violation and a terrible realization of the slave-thing she must become to this undying monster upon his throne unless she found a way of resistance where

none seemed possible.

Now Meloal did not voice her consuming anger, but moved to stand silently before the Queen, and their two minds met invisibly there before the Grey Lord in a communion from which he was excluded.

From that communion of two female minds the black Queen turned again to the Grey one, and gazed on him with a steady, penetrating, measuring look.

Scornful her voice, breaking the heavy silence that had so far remained unbroken since Meloal entered.

"I have sat for too long! How many life-times of mortals I have let you go your way, because now since the change that stranded us here, nothing mattered. But now you have overstepped your bounds. This girl is not the ordinary vegetable to whose fate I could reconcile my ancient love of her kind. I can not cynically turn away my face and feel nothing in my heart. You cannot have her, Sakum, you cannot have her or any like her! It is time you learned to live without such sustenance. I place my protection over her, and you know what that means!"

THE GREY long terrible face looked at her astounded. The incredible fingers twitched for a second in all their jointed length, uncontrollably. Something like fright, a long buried fear suddenly unearthed, came and went on the strange, too-wise face. A strong face, yet with an inner weakness as of some long-gnawing sickness.

Then IT shrugged and its thought came out and touched the mind of Meloal briefly, she sensed the probing, asking, knew that her loathing for the ancient creature was seen by him.

"Shall we play a game of our own

chess, my queen? It has been too long since we measured our strengths. This time your beauty will not again sway me to mercy, perhaps?"

Meloal sensed the question the Grey one put to the Queen, noted her swift angered acceptance. Marveled at the still, unmoving icy calm which held such passions confined. How endlessly long had their hate of each other been held on that leash of time? It was not understandable, these alien, terrible creatures could possess and be moved by such hatred and detestation each of the other, yet sit there. Have sat there in Lordship over this eerie world of theirs in calm acceptance of each other for many centuries? Meloal was at a loss to understand what lay between them to bind them so against their wills.

Evidently some ancient tie had today come undone. Herself the catalyst needed to cause the change, and that too was hard to understand. A game of chess—yet the Grey one did not mean chess. He meant instead some contest inexplicable as she sensed the thought between them, some terrific measuring of immortal powers—beyond anyones comprehension but their own undying minds.

Meloal still stood, waiting for she knew not what, while the two young-old creatures of another time rose and walked to opposite sides of the room.

There she noted two small cabinets of opaque gleaming stuff, these came out from the wall at a touch, revealing seats inside. Like the drivers seat of some strange vehicle, and the dash of many complex instruments before the seat.

Each took their places facing each other across the black and red squares of the floor. Even as they touched here and there a control upon the panel, the Queen spoke to Meloal orally:

"I will release your loved youth,

as you came to request, then you had better leave here at once."

Meloa stood watching them make these preparations, listening to the hum and pulse of new awakened power within the cabinets and beneath the floor—and shortly in at the great door came blindly stumbling the mindless zombie that had been her own Kal Harn.

The Grey One looked up, muttered:

"Enter, my first piece, and you expect to take him from me in violation of our agreement!"

From his strange panel of control of hidden power a force leaped out visibly, like violet fire tenuous but intense, touched Kal.

KAL WHEELED and began to leap across the squares toward the black Queen. Quite as swiftly she sent a beam of dull green force from her panel out upon Kal, and he stopped in his tracks. Gazed about him wonderingly, turned to Meloa with his eyes full of questions, and full of new life.

"Meloa! Life again! I thought I was dead, it was a very bad dream, I have been sick—" He came toward her, arms out. Meloa went into his arms with a glad cry.

"Oh Kal, it has been so terrible. The Grey One was going to..."

Some compulsion came to her then, making her tell Kal the thing the Grey One had done to her, and as she realized she had said what she would not, she started back, her hand to her mouth.

For Kal was raging back across the checkered floor, murder in his eyes. She saw he meant to kill the Grey One out of hand, with his bare fists.

But again the force beam flicked out and touched him, and again he became the mindless zombie he had

been when he entered.

Meloa herself now sprang across the red and black squares, intent on scratching out the things eyes that had done this to her man. Quite suddenly her own self vanished from within her, and she knew no more.

Two zombies shamled from the room, and the Grey Lord tittered as they went, he had triumphed over the Queen the first move. But the zombies made no answer.

As they reached the edge of the colored floor squares, a ray flicked to them from the Black Queen, touching each of them, and life came into their minds and into their eyes, and they both fled after one look back at the two who struggled.

In their minds a whisper went with them, etched there in a permanent intensity:

"Bring your Blades, and the Queen will find work for their swords!"

Behind them they sensed those two alien entities facing each other over their crossed swords of weird energy, and wondered, but ran on and on. Meloa murmured,—

"So begins a game that can end only in the death of one of them. And they have lived as mates for endless lifetimes of our time! They have been to each other the staff and solace of an immortal existence, here in the place they built within the bowels of Gran Jac!"

Kal Harn grunted. Then he grinned and answered: "They have lived too long together. Seems inevitable."

NOW MELOA was leading the way well known to her, toward the weird tunnel of force which led

to the great chamber of the prophecy. But how they, unknowing the method of travel along those whirling walls that were not matter but some strange divorce of matter from its inner energies; were to traverse the tunnel was beyond her.

The tall woman, black-clad as usual, with the great red bird on her shoulder, was waiting where the first misty greyness of the tunnel began. She smiled her too-knowing smile.

"You knew we were coming here? How?" cried Melo, embracing her tightly for a second, then standing back and waving a hand to Kal to show he was again himself and not mindless.

"I have a faculty for knowing even what is going to happen, little innocent. Come, I will show you the way, that your strong muscled lover may bring down upon the Grey Louse the doom he has earned so many times over."

"Yes, we want to go and bring our Blades here as the Queen asked us."

"But you must stay, Melo, else will I not help you. Your lover will then be sure to return with forces to set you free. If you go with him it will turn out that he will not return. I help you only to turn the tables on the being whom I detest above all others."

Near to the great whirling funnel that was the mouth of the way to the upper world was a small stone house. Here the tall woman made them enter. She took from a closet a cloak, a voluminous grey thing of almost gauzy texture, yet so much metallic weight to it as to be the heaviest garments Kal had ever worn.

"Put this on. As you step into the funnel mouth do so very slowly. Your body will adjust within the transforming metal of the cloak so that

it can withstand the dissolving forces that else would weaken you too greatly. Only thus may you hope to return."

"But how does it bear people both ways?" asked Kal, watching the eery twisting of the walls around and around.

"It is not anything built by men of today. It was put here by the race of which the Queen is the lone survivor, now. This cloak of metal gauze is the key needed. You will find the floor of the tunnel bears you along, clutching with its magnetic force at the metal."

She opened a small panel set in the wall. There were two levers, one black, and one white.

"You see, it is in some ways a simple magnetic vortice. It has many layers of force one over the other. You know how electric force travels in a wire, the current one direction, the field another? This is the same, by pulling one of these levers the forces reverse their flow, the white is the outward control. Kiss your woman and get on your way! The two who rule here will not remain at each others throat forever."

Melo watched Kal step into the tunnel and glide swiftly upward out of sight. Then she went back to the stone house, where her eery friend stood brooding and stroking the great scarlet bird on her shoulder. It shrieked at Melo and suddenly rose on wide wings, flying off toward the palace of the Grey Lord. Melo asked:

"Can you see the future truly? Tell me, then, woman of strange knowledge, will my man come back to me? If you answer no, I will put on a cloak and pursue him. I cannot live without him more. I have learned what it means..." Melo sobbed, and the woman took her in her arms

stroking her hair and crooning softly

CHAPTER FIVE

"YOU ARE overstrained, little one. It was needful or I would not have sent him away. Of course he will return again. It was that love for you I needed to make sure he would bring his Blades. Nothing is so sure to bring men on the run as the thought of their women in peril—even one alone like yourself. It is infallible."

"What is this Grey thing on his throne anyway? I cannot understand, he seemed to drink my strength from a distance, left me not the same, but changed. I felt drained of something. Then back into me rushed something that was not my own, yet strengthened me."

"That thing is no longer human flesh. He has changed, fighting the years with the science that was left by those who built this place. He has never faced determined opposition, and his preparations will not be enough to overcome well-trained and intelligent warriors such as I know your Nodes to be. They will do for him, and I will be happier knowing he is no longer able to work his will on such as you."

"I feel so different, as if my inner self was damaged..."

"You have been damaged, but you are young enough, you will recover. Heard you ever of the custom of beekeepers? They take the good honey from the hive, and put in its place sweetened water so the bees will not starve. His body, after so long living and the strange things he has done with his life forces, has become unable to create certain life forces. But he has learned to absorb the young life strength; and to keep his 'bees' alive, he has learned to feed them something much less good."

KAL HARN stepped out of the tunnel that was to the giant race of Gran Jac the Way of Death. He found the great chamber of the prophecy deserted except for a few gigantic warriors paying their devotions. These fell to their knees at sight of the strange elongated appearance caused by the light distortion in the field of magnetic force about the mouth of the tunnel. That grey robe had to them always meant the messenger from the land of Death.

It was with complete unbelief and consternation on their faces that they watched the tall figure step out of the mouth of the tunnel of force and become shorter, suddenly but an ordinary figure of the smaller races. He cast off the grey robe and appeared to them suddenly not as the dread messenger from the Lord of Death but as merely a warrior of the Nodes!

Kal took advantage of their frozen inability to comprehend. He struck the first blow at the beliefs that bound these giants to protect the tunnel from the very invasion he planned. Kal shouted:

"Now your eyes have seen the truth of this pathway of the dead. It is not holy. It is true there is a place within where the dead are brought back to life, but they are kept like walking dead for warriors if need arises. I think the need *should* arise. Help me get ship to my own world, there I will raise the signal and the Blades alone will invade this world of the dead if you will not help us. There are those who dwell in slavery to a sham, they are your people."

The giants rose from their knees, full of anger at his words. But in a moment the wonder of his presence after they had seen his dead body given to the Way—the possibility

that there was something not quite straight about this tunnel of death—began to penetrate their thinking.

One rumbled from his chest a few words, stumbling and incoherent. "I know not whether you be living or spirit. Certain it is you have trod the Way of the Dead and come forth alive. As such you have the right of the consecrated and are inviolate to our anger as to our laws. I will take you to the Genpoint, he will write you a permit to travel outward or to the globe of the Nodes if that is your desire. Or he will destroy you, knowing more of these mysteries than ourselves."

Kal put in a subtle word: "There will be some fine looting to do, rich and defenseless it is. You never saw such women as he has prisoned there. All as easy to take as the hat off your head..." With which Kal leaped and knocked the helmet from the warrior's head. The big fellow grinned and stooped to pick it up, his eyes upon the little man who had no fear of either Death or of himself.

VANUE moved the record control lever, and the scenes began to flash by at blurring speed. Mion leaned forward to watch intently, for the speed was now confusing.

CONFERENCES, violent arguing sessions, long trips from globe to globe of the five satellites—the effort Kal Harn had to make to convince his superiors his tale was true—To convince the Green Wing herself it was necessary to bring her the nurse and the doctor who had attended him on his death bed.

The meeting between the Genpoint and the Green Wing after their former disagreement, their agreement to join forces for this solution of the disappearance of the dead

placed before the Opening of the Way—the manufacture of a copy of the cloak that Kal had worn, in great numbers for the armies.

The Blades donning the grey metal uniforms their own technicians had manufactured from the one Kal brought. The flight of their ships to Gran Jac, back and forth, ferrying them all to the City of the Temple.

Their entrance into the here-to-fore sacred Temple, column on column tramping through the corridors of the ancient holiness now no longer holy. The shocked faces of the put-aside priests standing helpless before this mass sacrilege. Armed men tramping steadily through and into the fearful tunnel of weird force! The last of them entering and the mighty tread of the armies of Gran Jac beginning as they followed their gigantic Genpoint on the heels of the last of the Blades.

A good half of those marching black giants believed they were marching into death, and would never return—but they marched. Most of them did not doubt the ability of the ancient being ruling the land beyond the tunnel to defeat them, expected to find only dead Blades before the other end of the tunnel.

To the meeting between Kal Harn and Melo T, there in front of the Green Wing herself. Melo flung her arms about Kal and kissed him before them all, and tears stained many a warrior's eyes.

The march across that weird land of mist and glowing rocks and strange soft mosses. The sighting of the great grey palace of the past, and charging down upon them from the stony heights an army fearful beyond normal fear.

For they were an army of the undead, those who had passed through the tunnel and been turned into dead-alive by the Grey Lord. Mindless,

their lips giving forth no crys, their blades held straight before them. All moving in unison as though one mind alone directed every body—which it did. Somewhere, seated before some ancient energy device, the Grey Lord was directing his automatons—and each moved precisely as the other, stiffly they marched, ran, thrust and stabbed—all at the same time.

The fighting with that horde of mindless things that had once been men. Most of them were giant warriors from the planet surface, black warriors of Gran Jac, and the flame swords passed through their bodies, burning and searing away the flesh—yet they came on, swinging their weapons and killing the invaders, even when their own bodies were half destroyed. Fearful was the sight of warriors with legs hacked off, walking forward on the stumps, still stabbing and lunging in unison. And each and every face wearing the same masklike emptiness, a face without consciousness, a face that changed not even when the body was separated from it.

INTO THE thickest of the battle came then the tall black-gowned woman with the red bird upon her shoulder. Sent her great winged friend swooping and screaming above the struggle, and cried out to them all:

"Do not fight with these things. They are too worn with un-natural life and long time to catch a living man in flight. Run around them, push them aside and pass on, disregard them."

Even as she shouted at them she showed them with swift hands how they might be tripped up and piled together like cordwood, one on top of another, still with their swords moving and cutting, their legs still striding as if on firm earth!

After her demonstration the quick defeat of the army of the dead. Then the entrance at last into the dread old palace of the past, the glad cries of captive women as they saw that in truth this thing had come to pass and they were delivered from that which fed upon them.

Kal and Meloa and the Green Wing, the Genpoint's giant form beside them, coming into the great throne room of the red and black checkered floor.

Seated there still at their strange game the thin and beautiful black queen, flinging still her rays of force across the checkered floor against the Grey Lord. And it, the Grey one, his face fixed in a fury and his hands upon the ray levers that would not any longer bring him victory because the one being in all the world who would have made him invincible with her help was now an avenging fury. The repudiation on her face of the Grey One was a flame of meaning across the throne room, augmented by the great powers of the force rays at her finger tips.

Kal raging out across the checkered floor and the flame sword in his hand arcing out in a great stroke that would have lopped the head off the Grey One. But his ray leaped from his ancient device and the flame of the sword died away before it. Kal raging on, bringing the hilt of the useless sword down upon the head of the undying thing, sprawling him out across the red and black like a great dead spider.

The laugh of the black Queen to see him so, that contained many lifetimes of frustration and hate, a dreadful laugh to hear. Her ray touching his fallen head, and his thought made loud for them to hear:

"Of all my age of striving toward perfection of living, toward beauty and the possession of beauty. All, all

my work cut down by the fist of a youth of no intelligence. Ah, Ninitavha, my queen, how could you do this to me?"

Of the Queen's strange answer to the fallen Lord.

"You can ask that? Better to ask how could I have borne your evil life all this endless time without once understanding that you were no longer life, but something much less worth the simplest living thing! Better to ask what makes a wife so stupid about a thing she once loved!"

"If I had won our little game of chess, Ninitavha, I meant to put you into..."

Her ray reached out again and touched him, he stiffened, his weird long face assuming suddenly that mask like emptiness which told them—the Grey Lord had himself become what he had made of so many—a thing without a mind. To Kal and to them all it seemed a great improvement. The Genpoint led him off, destined for exhibit on the surface of Gran Jac.

VANUE TOUCHED the controls, and the shifting scenes of the thought cloud ceased to flow one into another, became the pearl and smoky amber of quiescence. Mion asked:

"But what of the stolen formula?"

Where has it been all this time?"

Vanue smiled. "The brother of the Green Wing stole it, he thought that with its possession he could bargain his way into the seat of the Dom. After the Dom gave the crown to his sister, he was afraid to confess. He still has it."

Mion laughed. He reached out and woke the thought cloud again, dialing a distant view of the five planets, watched while the great twisting serpent of disintegrant ions flowed on past the group of worlds.

"War will not sweep the five worlds now, the tide of Dee has passed on. It is a good record to demonstrate the influence of disintegrant flows upon human affairs."

Mion leaned back, his eyes striving to keep from watching the overpowering beauty of Vanue. The silk-enly sliding feet of the Nor maids came, removing the record spools, inserting again the usual suggestion records which made the home of Vanue a haven from all conflicting or destructive mental forces. Softly the great thought cloud moved upon itself, and spread everywhere about it a thought of ambition, of the goal of living, but for Mion it was not needed. For to him, the goal of living was to become worthy of this great being's regard.

A FINISHED SUBJECT



By Walter Webb



WE'RE always talking about the great futures of various branches of science and how their expansions are going to take place. For a change let's fasten on a branch of science and mathematics for which we can see no future expansion, a branch which we think has been completely explored. We're speaking of the draftsman's art of descriptive geometry.

When the French mathematician and engineer, Gaspard Monge, invented the method of projections, the three views which everyone knows, and assorted other complicated variations, his subject was rapidly considered by many others. From this study by scientists and engineers the whole

art of descriptive geometry and mechanical drawing was quickly exhausted. Now the matter is standardized completely and we know that machines will be drawn on blueprints in the year two thousand exactly as they have been for the last hundred years and are now.

Some of the methods of descriptive geometry are complicated, but when it is remembered that the subject was invented to enable us to clearly describe in drawings, any three dimensional object, no matter how viewed, it loses its terrors. So we have a condition in which a branch of science has reached its limit. One of the few branches where there is no future...

GOOD OLD GAS!

★ By J. R. Marks ★

IT'S THE fashion these days to criticize that tried and true standby of engineering and living—the gasoline engine. People are always talking about the wonders and simplicity of the electric motor, and saying that someday it will replace the gas engine when a suitable electric accumulator is developed. Well, this is true. And there's no denying that everything is in favor of the electric motor and the gas turbine. They're efficient clean, simple and have a thousand other virtues. But there is one thing to remember.

Practically all of the horsepower today—almost three quarters of it, at least in the U.S., is found in the ordinary internal combustion engine and this includes all coal and hydroelectric plants! That gives you some idea of how important the gas engine is. It has given the world mobility, whatever else may be said about it. It's reliable and rugged and can take a terrible beating and still run—as the last war showed. It appears as if the Otto cycle, internal combustion engine is going to be with us for a long, long time.

In light of this fact, what can we expect? Can we expect that it will be greatly improved? Hasn't the internal combustion engine just about reached its peak in development? Let us consider these things.

There will be few basic changes in gas engines. Modern engineering has just about reached the limit in this respect. We build good gas engines. True, there is a movement in the direction of valve in head engines. Higher compression is also coming. But these are not basic engineering improvements. They've been known about for a long time and they are a matter of fuel improvements rather than anything else.

In minor respects, the utilization of new alloys, new valve materials, more rigid crankshafts, and so forth, we can expect

small steps forward. A major improvement in gas engines also is in the matter of operating them at higher running temperatures. This can be done by using a closed cooling system, using steam as the medium and running the water jacket at the temperature of boiling water. This is more efficient and better for the engine. Another approach, and a mighty important one, is the use of air-cooled engines. This research has been stimulated by the Army which knows how much unnecessary weight and complications are added to an engine which is water cooled. As a result numerous truck engine manufacturers are developing air-cooled engines which weigh a third of the conventional weight, and which are easier to maintain, smaller and more efficient for the same horsepower.

It is only a matter of time before such simplified engines are applied to the automobile. We have had air-cooled engines in cars in the past. Why they haven't been a great success is inexplicable. Primarily it is inertia and resistance to anything new that so characterizes much of the buying public. Undoubtedly air-cooled engines are in the near future.

All of these things however may be nullified if and when a successful, cheap gas turbine is manufactured. It seems too early to say definitely, but certainly the hand-writing is on the wall. The gas turbine is coming—and fast. Even so, the internal combustion engine appears as if it will be with us for a long time. An eminent Chinese engineer says that what his backward country needs is numerous simple two-cylinder engines to take the curse off manual labor. So the answer is—don't sell the good old gas engine short. We'll be hearing a lot about pistons and valves even during the early rocket and atomic ages!

* * *

MICHELSON'S TIDES

★ By W. R. Chase ★

THE NAME of Michelson, the American physicist, is immortalized in a number of scientific instruments and experiments. There are the Michelson interferometer used in measuring the stars, the famous Michelson-Morley experiment so famous in relativity, and not least, "the Michelson Ocean."

The interferometer is now used wherever minute distances are to be accurately measured. It is an optical instrument of extreme sensitivity. As a matter of fact it was the heart of the Michelson-Morley experiment.

But not so well known is the Michelson Ocean. In an effort to measure the tides, the effect of the Moon on the Earth's

oceans, Michelson constructed a steel pipe about a hundred and fifty meters long, leveled with extraordinary accuracy. By locating telescopes at either end and filling the pipe half full of water it was possible to duplicate the Pacific on a small scale.

While this experiment gave accurate data on the heights of the tides, it also provided the information indirectly that the rigidity of the Earth was comparable with steel, an opinion which hadn't hitherto been held. Study of earthquakes later confirmed this discovery. Also a consequence of this experiment was the observation that, though to strong quick forces the Earth acts like steel, to weak long-duration forces, the Earth behaves as a plastic putty-ball!

CITY OF THE DEAD

By G. M. Martin

**They called Launn a city of the dead. Its
Martian peoples lay frozen in their tracks.
But were they really dead—or only asleep?**

Paper of Research Prepared by
Professor John Granger
Weston Scientific Foundation
New York, N. Y.
August 11, 2024

Having recently returned from that barren section of Mars, called the Plain of Parna, I wish to report that the City of Launn actually exists. Scientists of this foundation have long believed that at one time the Plain of Parna, now desolate wasteland was inhabited, and irrigated to produce vast riches to support a city far ahead, in every cultural sense, of any earth settlement.

Sparse news of Launn can be gathered on Mars itself. As this planet has once more reverted to the rugged, mining and pioneer country that our own west resembled at one time, the people chuckle at the mere thought that Launn existed or that Mars has ever been anything but a rough, uncomfortable place to live.

Not discouraged at the unfriendly attitude encountered in Martian settlements, I left the last outpost, Fitzroy, on the edge of the Plain of Parna, July seventh, 2023. I was alone, and in trying to navigate over the Plain in a small space ship supplied for me by the foundation, I soon learned that the terrific heat caused updrafts above the desert that made space navigation impossible. I was forced to return to Fitz-

roy and solicit the assistance of a Burtell* caravan master, who after many weeks, managed to come within sight of Launn. It was then that I learned that other Martians had seen Launn, but refused to help me as they feared the strange city of dead.

While the caravan master waited for a week at the edge of the city, I carried on alone. I have proven that this city is inhabited by a race of *dead* people. Men and women who, for some strange reason, were suddenly petrified in the very midst of their activity. I found men in the act of cutting hair, stopped in action, their clippers halted in mid-air.

I found shopkeepers, women at the city fountain, everyone in fact, smiling and robust in appearance, but solid as stone and standing as they must have stood when some strange force rooted them to the spot.

Launn, I have deduced, was not only centuries ahead of all other Martian civilization, but had machines and culture vastly improved on our own.

It is my fondest dream to return to Launn with proper materials, and attempt to bring the people of this city to life. To study them and determine what changes can be made to better our own living by copying

**Burtell - Martian desert burro*



Granger couldn't make up his mind whether to be alarmed or amused by the appearance and actions of the insect men

the citizens of this long dead city.

I am prepared...

AUTHOR'S NOTE— This account covered a total of five hundred pages, and dealt in detail with every phase of life (or death) in Launn. It was read on August 22, to the members of the Weston Research Foundation.

Charles Weston, a stern faced man, his almost bald scalp shining under the light of the lamps above the long table, cleared his throat.

"Gentlemen," he addressed the distinguished group seated on either side of the table. "You have heard John Granger's report. May I, as the leader of this foundation, offer a few words?"

It was obvious from the look of determination on his face that no one could stop him. No one tried.

"Granger is ill at present. He could not be at this meeting and the report has been read by the secretary of the foundation. It is a most interesting report, if rather long winded..."

A few men chuckled softly at this point.

"Granger is ill, as I mentioned before. His—mind—isn't quite as clear as it was when he joined our ranks several years ago.

His meaning was obvious. Some of the foundation's members smiled. Others, friends of Granger, didn't look happy.

"Granger tells us that we can gain a cultural heritage from Launn, if in some expensive and far fetched manner, we can restore life to a race of dead people that we are not even sure exist.

"Weston Foundation spends its money only on sound research, where the benefits gained can be given direct to Americans to better

their living. For this reason, I vote against anything that sounds as vague as Granger's suggestion. I do not care to spend millions pursuing a will-o-the wisp which probably exists only in Granger's mind."

He sat down rather heavily, lighted a new cigar and waited for suggestions. Near the far end of the table a tall, rather gaunt looking man stood up. Weston nodded at him.

"What have you to say, Jordon?"

Phillip Jordon smiled. It made him look like a grinning death head with nothing but skin to cover the bones of his ugly face.

"I'm with you, Weston," he said. "But I'll go a step farther. Granger is washed up. He's too old and he's a dreamer. Not aggressive enough for the foundation's purpose. I propose that he be asked to retire and give up his position here."

A stir of unrest in the room caused men to whisper among themselves. Someone said, without arising.

"Granger didn't cut in on your field at Fitzroy, did he Phillip?"

PHILLIP JORDON reddened. Weston was on his feet, and his heavy fist crashed down on the table.

"Just a moment," he said loudly. "Phillip Jordon is a member of good standing here. It was long ago proven that he has no connection with Sulphana Inc. Why do you men persist...?"

The man who had challenged Jordon stood up. His name was Weak, and he was one of the few Granger supporters left in the room.

"Because," he said, "Jordon has been seen in and out of Sulphana for years. Sulphana gets its product from an undetermined location near

Fitzroy, Mars. I have cancelled checks proving that Jordon received regular payments from Sulphana and now he is very anxious to keep Granger from going back to Fitzroy. It fits, that's all. I see it that way, and I'll send in my resignation tomorrow. Good day, gentlemen."

He pushed his chair back and left the room.

The room was very quiet, save for Weston's labored breathing. Few men dared insult him in this manner. He owned and operated the largest research group in America.

"Weston owns America's brains," was the saying of the nation.

"Are there any more who wish to walk through that door?" he asked at last. No one moved. No one looked up.

"I accept your suggestion, Jordon," Weston said at length. "Granger will be asked to retire at once."

CHARLES WESTON—President of the organization—said in the **NEW YORK CITIZEN**:

Granger's report reflects in no way on the Foundation. We do not choose to vouch for the truth of his words, or to deny it. Further study is necessary. Personally, I can say that doubt exists in my mind concerning the full truth of the report.

August 30—NEW YORK CITIZEN: John Granger, the man who visited a dead city, killed his own chances for a fine career with the Weston Research Foundation by resigning abruptly, without explaining his reasons for doing so. It is thought that a statement in this paper by the director of the Foundation, Charles Weston, may have caused ill feelings between these two men.

AUTHOR'S NOTE—Several years passed after Granger dropped back into public life. Then in 2033, a small concern announced its intention to explore the Plain of Parna at its own expense. The organization was listed as Granger and Brandon—Scientific Foundation. An insight into this organization can be gained by the following letter from Lester R. Brandon of Yale College to:

John Granger
144 Ridge Road
Brighton, New York
Dear Mr. Granger:

Our past correspondence has been pleasant, but without direct results. I have studied the Weston case against you with great interest and agree that Phillip Jordon shows undue interest in preventing us from visiting Launn. Jordon has recently been doing business openly with Sulphana Inc. Sulphana's product, I am ready to swear, is not a manufactured one. It has been produced by some animal of plant life, for we find it impossible to break down chemically all the ingredients found in it. Like the ancient sulpha drug, it cures. But it works in cases that one would think impossible to effect a cure. Sulphana will cure and knit a wound in two days. It will actually bring a man back to health when all other medical aids have failed.

It is my belief that our trip to Launn will be two-fold in purpose. I will attempt to assist you in bringing to life the strange race of people you mention. I will also attempt to trace the source of Sulphana. The organization now controlling it holds a monopoly, and is robbing the public with prices beyond all reason. I would like to play a part in bringing Sulphana down to the working

man's reach and at the same time join with you in an attempt to save Launn.

I realize that officially your standing is bad. Weston ruined you. That makes no difference to me. I'm young and have no reputation. This trip may make me great. It cannot harm me, for there is no reputation to harm.

Cordially,
Les Brandon

This was followed by another letter on September 4 of the same year, also to:

John Granger
144 Ridge Road
Brighton, New York

Dear John:

The plans are complete. I will supply a cook, Mrs. Jenny Hudson, who is a hardy soul and a clever person with a menu. Her husband, who for some years has done janitor work here at the college, is the very man for the hardwork of the organization. PeeWee Hudson we call him, and he's well over six feet tall, hard as nails and clever with his fists.

I'm delighted to hear that your wife wishes to accompany us. I'm sure from your description that she's a very pleasant person, and will add to the success of the venture.

I'll meet you at Fitzroy, Mars, in October. The worst of the heat will be gone from the Plain of Parna by then. I plan to ship the desert car from New York this month and go along as space cargo to see the car safely to Fitzroy.

Your friend,
Les Brandon

* * *

THE SLIM freight-bubble flashed over the twisting sands of the

Plain of Parna, sending up a roll of dust in its wake. Inside the swift utility car, five people sat in various stages of exhaustion. PeeWee Hudson's wife, Jenny, was the worst. Jenny, fat and covered with perspiration, had grumbled ever since the freight-bubble left Fitzroy, the last Martian outpost on the edge of the Plain of Parna.

PeeWee Hudson had ignored his wife thus far, but his huge face was red with humiliation for her actions. If Jenny troubled him with her constant nagging, the others in the car were secretly amused at the whole affair.

John Granger smiled as he guided the car ahead, his hands gripping the steering levers.

"Hold out a half hour longer," he said. "We'll be close to Launn by then. It will be cooler near the mountains."

Jenny sniffed.

"I said it once and I'll say it again, John Granger. I don't approve of this visiting dead people. It ain't..."

PeeWee Hudson's mouth opened slowly.

"Aww! Jenny, why don't you keep quiet. You're just fretting."

Jenny's jaws snapped together with an audible click.

"Don't you tell me to shut up, PeeWee Hudson," she resumed. "I'll..."

"Hold it, Jenny," the young man sitting behind the map-desk said. "There isn't room in here for a free for all. Wait until we reach Launn. We'll rope off a ring and you and your husband can fight it out."

Jenny Hudson gave Les Brandon one of those, 'Now see here young man' looks, and remained silent. Brandon studied his maps for a moment and then looked up again.

"Ten minutes will end the journey, John, if my figures check. Give me the readings once more, will you?"

John Granger turned momentarily to his young flaxen-haired Eve who sat beside him.

"Give our most excellent assistant the necessary data, will you, Eve?"

Eve Granger laughed.

"I guess that will silence you, master-mind Brandon," she called back to the man at the map-desk. "Relax, will you. Don't be so darned formal out here on the desert."

Brandon smiled and consulted his maps once more. Eve Granger frowned upon receiving no reply, then started to read the instruments on the control board.

"Speed—450—time out of Fitzroy—5 hours—time to Launn—estimated twenty minutes—"

"Check," Brandon said. "Thank you, Mrs. Granger."

She turned half around in her seat and said with a smile, "Eve, to my jewels."

Brandon tried to smile, failed miserably and went back to his work.

THE HEAT was increasing. The low built, speedy car hurtled ahead, its rubber treads flashing under it, bouncing into the air now and then, to hit fifteen or twenty yards further ahead and gather speed once more.

Within, triple shock absorbers killed the vibration. The car was a traveling fortress, filled with scientific materials, food supplies and light armaments. There remained just room to accommodate its five occupants, officially entered on the Fitzroy records as the Granger Exploration Party.

Ahead of them now, under the purple shadows of the Mountain of

Spawn, a city was springing out of the desert. Bits of it seemed to arise and take shape in the misty shadows of later afternoon. Gradually the people in the exploration car grew quiet. Les Brandon looked up from his desk and stared ahead, over Eve Granger's golden head at the city. Jenny forgot to quarrel with her husband and John Granger gripped the levers more tightly and fought with the rocket motors to get just a little more speed.

This was Launn, City of the Dead.

This was the center of a vast civilization in an arid desert country where people supposedly did not exist. Abruptly the desert ceased and the first towers of Launn rose abruptly toward the sky. They were slim and cylindrical, made of the daintiest crystal, yet designed never to fall. Launn was laid out in a vast circle beneath the forboding crags of the Mount of Spawn. It nestled there on the edge of the Plain of Parna, like a huge, delicately cut jewel, lovely as a diamond yet nestled in a setting of dust and grim shadows.

John Granger was the first to speak.

"I have come back to Launn," he said softly. "I said ten years ago that I would return. I made that promise to the Prince. I wonder," his voice was strangely choked with emotion, "if there is still time?"

He had married Eve, ten years his junior, when he returned from his first pilgrimage to Launn. Brandon was a good man, but he had been in high school then. PeeWee Hudson and his wife were almost strangers to Granger. PeeWee had been added for his brawn and Jenny because she cooked food that no expedition could afford to be without.

"John," Eve Granger's voice was

a trifle awed, "those towers and the low, beautifully designed buildings below them? They are full of the dead?"

Granger nodded.

"Dead? Yes, according to our standards. Stiff yet natural, like frozen marble. I wonder if they are actually dead?"

"We'll pray that they aren't, Professor," Brandon said suddenly. His voice, cool, businesslike, startled the dreamlike atmosphere of the conversation. "The melform injections may do the trick."

His eyes were bright. His voice, untouched by the spell of magic felt by the others, sounded mechanical and like a college student reciting a lesson. There wasn't a bit of romance in Brandon, Eve Granger thought, and it made her resent him strangely. Brandon was miscast in this dream world. Brandon was—too—well—too darn down to earth. She shivered, letting the twisting, reeling shadows and the purple mists catch hold of her soul. This was a wonderful place. A land of dreams and of death.

"I suggest that we avoid the city tonight," Brandon said, his words clipped and professional.

John Granger nodded.

"Memories urge me to rush in at once to revisit the palace," he said. "Yet I know you're right. There have been changes. It might not be safe. We'll establish camp close to the walls and go in when morning brings better light."

EVE GRANGER turned hurriedly in her seat, disappointment clouding her pretty face.

"Oh—Les." She looked at Brandon. "There you go again. Always scientific and practical. How can you resist those lovely towers? I

should think you'd want to see for yourself all the wonderful things John has been telling about all these years. Why don't you get your nose away from the desk and be human for a little while?"

PeeWee Hudson grunted a little, his only form of protest. He dared not speak aloud before Jenny, but he agreed with Brandon. Eve Granger picked on Brandon most of the time. Brandon was all right. He was a whizz at medical science, and plenty cool. Plenty, PeeWee thought. Why didn't the Granger dame keep her pretty mouth shut?

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Granger," Brandon said. "Your husband mentioned the insect people who caused him trouble during his last trip here. I wouldn't let the spell of the city catch me off guard if I were you. It might be well to be cautious."

The girl had turned around once more, her face red as she stared straight ahead.

Brandon studied the back of her head for a minute, then returned to his papers. The car halted.

John Granger climbed wearily from behind the control panel.

"You and PeeWee set up camp," he said. "Eve and I will go a bit closer to Launn and have a look around. Eve is quite anxious to see the place."

"I wouldn't suggest..."

"We didn't ask for suggestions," Eve Granger snapped. She followed her husband down the small ladder to the desert floor. "Set up the tents, Les. That's your style. Be sure your netting is snug tonight. A little green insect man might creep in and pinch you on the leg."

They waited until John Granger and his wife were some distance away. Then PeeWee Hudson lumbered down the stairs and started to

open the freight compartment. He was busy pulling out the carefully rolled silken tents when Brandon descended the stairs, stretched and stared after John and Eve Granger, tiny specks against the horizon.

"Never mind that broad," PeeWee said in a voice filled with disgust. "She ain't got brains enough to come in outa the wet. You're okay, Mr. Brandon. What you said was right."

Brandon turned absently and gave him a hand with the tent poles.

"I'm not so sure that I am," he said mildly. "You know, Mrs. Granger has real spirit. I admire spirit."

"Jeez," Hudson said. "Jeez, but you can take an awful lickin' and come back for more."

"It's a pity you can't be polite to women, PeeWee Hudson." PeeWee ducked instinctively as Jenny came toward them. "Now rattle your bones around and get that camp stove set up. We're all too hungry to listen to your tongue rattle."

PeeWee Hudson winked at Brandon.

"You see what I mean," he said in a low voice. "Women are a lot alike."

"What's that?" Jenny Hudson's ears were tuned to just such conversational undertones.

PeeWee straightened up, carrying the stove, and went toward her with it.

"I said women are all right," PeeWee said. "Say Jenny, you gonna give us some more of that Fitzroy special tonight? That's the best bread I ever did eat."

Jenny sniffed.

"You're kiddin' again, PeeWee," she said, but it was evident that she was pleased. "You go out there and make sure the Professor is all..."

"BONG"

THE CLEAR, deep notes of a bell silenced her abruptly. The three of them pivoted as one toward the rapidly darkening city of Launn.

"What the heck was that?" PeeWee inquired.

"One of them darned corpses coming to life," Jenny said in an awed voice. "I knew we shouldn't..."

"BONG"

The sound came again, the distant pealing of a great bell, vibrating against the thin air.

Brandon dropped the tent-roll which he had started to assemble.

"Get the fire pistols," he shouted. "I'll bring the rifles from the cabin. Jenny, you stay with the car and keep the fire gun ready. We may need you."

Brandon's voice was urgent and filled with something more compelling than fear. Without a word, Jenny and PeeWee Hudson made their way swiftly to the car. Hudson came out with two small, wicked looking pistols. He caught up with Brandon who was already on his way across the sands.

"What you figure is wrong?"

Hudson ran as fast as his heavy body would allow. He had to struggle to keep up with Brandon who moved swiftly, easily, in long, running strides.

"The green men Granger told us about," Brandon snapped. "Jenny was wrong about the dead ones. They can't harm us. It's the living we must worry about."

They reached the outskirts of Launn and because he had heard long detailed accounts of the city from John Granger's lips, Brandon knew where he was going. Low, colorful buildings closed in about them. Empty doorways, empty streets, silent, tomb-like places swallowed them up.

"Where was the bell?"

PeeWee Hudson was beginning to get his wind. Away from Jenny, his courage arose.

"From the palace, I think," Brandon said. "John and Mrs. Granger must have gone there in spite of my advice. They've met the insect men. God alone knows..."

He stopped trying to talk, and conserved his breath. The city was a wonderful place, but he had no time to notice it now. He was aware only that the gong had rung twice and was now silent. That he and PeeWee Hudson had to save their friends from death.

He had heard about the gong.

"If a visitor dares enter Launn and does not return, the gong sounds," John Granger had told him years ago. "After the gong sounds, it is but a matter of time before the body is found. Launn is a beautiful place, haunted with grim, stalking death."

Damn Eve Granger, Brandon thought. If her anxiety to see Launn tonight had resulted in her husband's death, the exploration would be useless. Women, in young Brandon's estimation, were thick headed, lovely fools.

THE PALACE was close to the outskirts of the city. Brandon had it in his mind as clearly as though he had been here a hundred times. Even as he saw it, he remembered Granger's first description, and could not change a word of it. His feet pounded up the wide marble stairs. He heard PeeWee Hudson close behind.

"A palace beyond description with great beauty and unity of design," Granger had said. "Built low to the ground, with crystal spires rising from its many terraces. Spires that point upward until you fear they

might pierce the sky. The terraces were barren of life, but shimmering under the radiance of millions of strange jewels set into the floors and the walls. The palace of Launn is a wonderful place."

Those had been Granger's words, and Brandon thought as he charged across the first terrace, that this was not wonderful, but a treacherous, death-filled morgue.

He hardly noticed the two silent guards in blue who stood on each side of the doors as he threw them open. His eyes were focused down the long tapestry hung hall, and at the scene in the throne room beyond.

The insect men of John Granger's memory.

He kept on running, the fire pistol in one hand, the powerful fire rifle in his other. He heard Hudson swear loudly behind him.

At the entrance of the throne room, Brandon stopped short, his eyes wide with amazement.

The room was huge, a crystal ceiling shimmering high above in the pale light. In the center of the great room, seated on a high throne, was the dead Prince of Launn, blond headed, garbed in a rich, crimson robe, his clear eyes staring over the mob below him. Staring into infinity—into the land beyond life.

John and Eve Granger were at his feet, their arms and legs bound with bits of their own clothing.

About them, crawling like a vast horde of huge ants, the insect men of Launn were swarming. Brandon's eyes swept the scene hurriedly, desperately, yet the details were so terrible that he remembered them forever after.

The insect men were three feet long, and their faces, yellow and beaked, looked strangely human. Be-

yond that, all resemblance to human beings ended abruptly. Their bodies were an unhealthy green and their forearms were jointed and hinged like the arms of a lobster. Their bodies were fat and puffy and they propelled themselves by four hind feet that kicked spasmodically, sending them scuttling along at a tremendous speed. The floor was covered with a green slimy substance that seemed to come from them as they scurried along the floor.

Brandon saw two insect men dart in and nip at Granger with the long forearms.

He charged in among them, tossing aside the fire pistol and pulling back the trigger that opened the full power of the fire rifle.

IT MUST have been the sudden surprise that caught them off guard and sent them scuttling for protection.

Brandon lost all sense of caution. He moved ahead steadily, never giving ground, always with that searing, fire-trail of death cutting ahead of him. He saw three of them start to drag Granger away. Taking a chance at hitting his friend, he managed to kill the creatures. The room was silent now. One or two of the dying insect men tried to rise, and fell again, to roll over with their terrible limbs protruding in the air.

He was at Granger's side, fighting with the knots that held him.

"Thank God," he heard Granger mumble.

Eve's face was very white and as he helped her to her feet, she leaned against him heavily.

"You'll be all right," he said.

She was crying hysterically. Her husband came to her.

"We've got to get out of here before they return," he said, and they

started unsteadily for the door. PeeWee Hudson followed, still swearing loudly at the dead and dying he left behind. The throne room was a shambles. As Brandon hurried after his friends, he took one last look at the dead Prince.

The Prince was as he had first seen him, serene and calm in death.

BRANDON led the way back to the camp. Eve Granger refused to speak to him again. Brandon knew how she and her husband felt. They had entered the city against their own better judgment. That they were still alive was due to better luck than either of them deserved.

"I'll admit as much," Granger said when they were once more near their own fire and under the protection of the heavy gun mounted in the car. "Eve and I were fools. We ventured too far into the city. They attacked us in the streets and carried us to the palace. Admit, Eve, that Les was no cream puff. He saved our lives."

Eve Granger didn't answer. She turned away from the group, back toward the city.

Granger hesitated, then embarrassed at her behaviour, cleared his throat and went on talking.

"Good job, Brandon. The insect men know I'm back and they know why. For that reason, they're hostile toward me, though I've never harmed any of them before. From now on, it will be a battle of the death."

Dinner was consumed and the fire died out. Jenny Hudson basked in the glory of having produced a good meal and PeeWee fell asleep under the car.

For a long time after the others were asleep, Brandon stood on the desert, staring at the strange city of Launn. Something stirred within

him that he could not explain. Why had Eve refused to be his friend? It had never mattered much to him what any woman said or thought. Yet, tonight he was vaguely distressed by her attitude. He decided that she was just another bull-headed member of her ungrateful sex, and tried to let it go at that. Still, he was worried and could not sleep when at last he tied the netting around his cot and sought rest. He kept remembering her warning of this afternoon.

"Be sure to sleep with your netting tied tightly."

He swore and turned on his back, staring up at the clear, crazy pattern of a strange sky.

Eve Granger, he decided, was getting under his skin.

"I THINK," John Granger said quietly, "that we should tour the city in the desert car. I suggest that one person remain in the car to cover any side trips we wish to make into the various buildings. In that way, the insect men will be unable to surprise us."

The small party had gathered early, the camp was dismantled and packed away in the car. They were ready for the first official visit to Launn.

"The plan is a good one," Brandon said. "After last night, we face danger at every corner."

Eve Granger who had failed to offer anything to the conversation thus far, suggested a little sarcastically:

"Perhaps *you* should stay in the car, Mr. Brandon. It may not be safe..."

"Eve," John Granger interrupted almost harshly, "if you can't be civil this morning, I think you'd be better off away from us all. You may drive."

The girl's face flushed crimson, but she didn't reply. She went hurriedly up the ramp and into the navigation room of the vehicle. In five minutes they were entering Launn.

With the coming of daylight, the city was more beautiful than ever. For an hour they cruised up wide colorful streets, across sparkling lagoons and over tower ramps, high above the earth level.

At last Granger asked that the car be halted before a small, compact building constructed of colored bricks.

"Here," he said solemnly, "we will see for the first time what devastating effect the Power had on the people of Launn."

They had long ago learned to speak of it as the Power. No one knew what had happened to the people of Launn. Something had killed them while life was proceeding at a normal pace. The Power had stopped all action suddenly, like a clock that runs down and cannot continue to tick.

They left the car quietly. Brandon was thinking of the handsome Prince of Launn whom he had seen last night. A man caught in the prime of life, sitting on his throne, staring with sightless eyes over the heads of green insects.

John Granger took the lead, opening the door to the building. They crowded into the doorway, Jenny Hudson and her husband, PeeWee, John Granger and Brandon. None of them spoke for a long time. Then Jenny said in a hushed voice:

"Dozens of them. All nice looking, too, and deader than herring."

Granger sighed.

"Dead? We hope not. Perhaps...?"

The room must have been a place of worship. It was large, decorated with huge murals of finest craftsmanship. Delicate crystal windows

allowed the morning light to sift across row upon row of still, intelligent faces. Every person in the room was spotlessly robed in white silk. Every person, and there were hundreds of them, was staring sightlessly at the empty altar near the far end of the room. It was like a huge exhibit in a wax museum, Brandon thought. A perfect reproduction of life frozen in death.

He turned away and his eyes sought Eve Granger, still sitting above them in the cab of the car. She was frowning.

He heard the door close behind him and Granger said:

"All over the city. Barbers, actors on the stage, craftsmen at their work, society people, bathing, reading, living in their homes. The Power caught them all, rich and poor alike. Preserved them thus."

IT WAS close to night once more, and they had seen it all. Seen everything that John Granger had waited and fought to return to for ten long years.

The car halted in a huge park.

"This will be satisfactory," Granger said. "The lagoon will supply water. The turf is clear for a hundred yards in any direction. The insured men can't steal up without being seen."

In an hour they had established camp.

After that, Brandon wandered around by himself, careful to stay within range of the heavy fire guns that PeeWee Hudson kept watch over in the car. Eve Granger was hard at work with Jenny Hudson. They were working over the dinner. John Granger had retired to his maps of the city, where every person in Launn was recorded as a small 'x' on roll after roll of white map paper.

The plan was simple, Brandon thought. Of seven serums he had prepared, they hoped that one would revive the population, or at least part of it. After that, Granger would work methodically until every small 'x' had been erased, until every person in Launn was alive. Then would come the months, perhaps years, of study. The master plan was to take from these people a culture that would be invaluable on earth.

There was no doubt in Brandon's mind that this was a far advanced civilization.

What had caused its death?

In addition to the cultural aspect, Brandon couldn't shake from his mind the stern, compelling face of Phillip Jordon, the man who had fought their plans until the last moment. From Fitzroy, giant liners took valuable Sulphana to earth. Yet, no one knew where it came from. Perhaps from Launn?

He thought that they had not heard the last of Jordon. Jordon was a hard man, and if they came even close to stumbling on to the source of Sulphana, Jordon would be there to protect his interests.

Did the dead people of Launn know the secret of Sulphana? Perhaps. Time would tell. If they did, Jordon must have found it by accident. Launn had been dead for many centuries. How many; no one knew. Brandon shrugged. That would come later. As long as Jordon left them alone, there was other work to be done. He must help Granger first. Help the man regain his position in society and in the great Weston Foundation. That meant more to Granger than a fortune in Sulphana. Meant more than life itself, and Granger was no longer a young man.

Granger's age turned Brandon's thoughts to Eve. Granger's wife was

a young, selfish woman. Granger should never have married her. He, Brandon, had to get his mind off Eve. She wasn't good for him. Wasn't good for any of them.

Above the park, the lofty, black crags of the Mountain of Spawn pushed toward the city. The cliffs seemed to reach out like shadows, closing in upon him. He drew his tunic closer and walked back to the camp. Jenny Hudson was dishing out savory bowls of turtle soup. He forgot for a time the grasping shadows of the mountain.

BUT I'LL swear she was sound asleep at six this morning," Jenny Hudson said. "PeeWee snores, poor thing. I'm not used to sleeping in the same room with him. He woke me up at six and I took a peek through the curtain at Mrs. Granger. She was sound asleep."

John Granger returned from his search of the lagoon. His face was lined with worry. He managed to keep his voice calm.

"Brandon, I'm afraid I'm responsible for Eve's disappearance," he said. "I spoke harshly to her last night. She's not accustomed to this sort of thing. Lived a sheltered life at Brighton. I depended on her to pull out of it in a week or two. She's not a bad sort of girl."

PeeWee took the heavy gun and started toward the desert. He said, "I think you'd better stay with Jenny. I'll try some of the streets near the palace."

It was eight in the morning. Jenny had called Eve Granger at seven. It was then that the search had started. Les Brandon had missed his small bag, the one that contained the injection needles.

He had his own theory of Eve's disappearance. Thus far he had de-

cided not to pass it on to the others.

"I don't feel right about staying here—not helping," Granger said. "I guess Jenny needs me."

"Jenny Hudson can take care of herself," the fat woman said stubbornly. "I'll sit up there near the fire cannon and if any of them darned green bugs show up, I'll blast them into Kingdom-Come."

Granger turned appealingly to Brandon.

Brandon nodded.

"I guess Jenny's right," he said.

Together they started toward the palace.

Brandon had noticed as time went on that Launn started getting under a man's skin. The uncanny silence was disturbing. Here was a great city, perfectly in order, without movement or sound within its limits. Here, behind every door, dead people stood or sat on their jobs, a sit down strike that struck horror to the heart of any man. People had sat for perhaps ten centuries, their bodies in perfect condition, without movement or life. A city suspended in time.

They reached the palace. They went down the great hall toward the throne room.

With the injection case gone, Brandon guessed that Eve Granger might have decided to get revenge of sorts for the manner in which they had treated her.

HE REACHED the court room, to see that the dead Prince was still on his throne. Nothing had been touched.

Then he had been wrong. In guessing at Eve's actions, he assumed that the Prince would be the first person she might try to restore to life. She would, in this manner prove to them that she was not helpless but

was entirely able to become a working member of the group.

Granger watched him circle the throne slowly, then curiosity made him question Brandon.

"You think that Eve would have come here?"

Brandon nodded.

"My injection case was missing," he said. "I didn't tell the others."

Granger thought for some time. Then he nodded.

"That sounds like Eve all right. Headstrong as she is, she may have hoped to steal some of our glory to prove herself fit."

"Evidently not," Brandon said.

He started back toward the outer doors. The palace was silent. The sun, coming in the doors, made strange designs on the rugs.

Halfway to the open doors, he stopped abruptly. Something was wrong with the picture he saw. Something that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

He stood still, staring at the rich rugs, the pictures of royalty that that hung on the wall. Then it dawned on him.

"*The blue guards,*" he said aloud.

John Granger's eyes widened with amazement.

"The what?"

Brandon started to run toward the door.

"The blue guards," he repeated. "Remember, last night there were two guards, one on each side of the door. They were tall men, dressed in blue. *They're gone.*"

They were gone. He found the faint dust prints where they had been standing. The men had disappeared. He stared at Granger.

"Could it have been Eve?"

Granger's face was red with anger.

"The people of Launn have been still for centuries," he said.

"The insect men have made no attempt to molest them. Draw your own conclusions."

BRANDON started to run back toward the car where Jenny Hudson stood guard.

"If Eve really succeeded with the injections," he shouted as he ran, "then more power to her. I hadn't dared hope for success so soon. She will probably return to the car at once."

Granger was panting.

"To laugh at us," he offered. "Yes, that would be Eve's first thought."

They slowed their pace as they reached the park. Jenny Hudson turning the barrel of the big gun on them, was waiting for them to approach. Once they were within hearing distance, Brandon shouted:

"Has Eve returned?"

Jenny shook her head.

"PeeWee came back ten minutes ago," she said. "He met a couple of gents in blue pajamas and had to shoot the daylights out of them. They were going to murder my PeeWee. He's gone toward the palace to meet you. I told him you went that way."

Brandon swore softly.

"If I find that woman," he said grimly under his breath.

John Granger sank to the grass and lowered his gun.

"Pound the living daylights out of her," he suggested. "I would myself, if I was sure I could handle her—and that we'll still find her alive."

Something exploded in the street, far away, in the direction they had come. It sent a strange, colorful rainbow of sparks above the tops of the buildings. It sank down again, and Launn was silent once more.

"PeeWee's found something," Jen-

nie cried excitedly. "He took a Barton* flare with him. Said if he used it to come in a hurry."

Brandon reached the ramp on the car with one long jump. Granger was close behind. Before Granger had time to close the door, Brandon had the rocket jets firing rapidly. The car heaved loose from the soft earth of the park and lunged into the street. They gathered speed, moving rapidly toward the spot where the Barton flare had exploded. Brandon shouted up through the hatch to the gunroom.

"Get that gun ready, Jenny. You may have to shoot your way through to PeeWee."

He heard Jenny chuckle with satisfaction and knew that she would be ready. John Granger was busy breaking out the ammunition for the fire rifles.

EVE GRANGER slipped quietly from the cot and tip-toed through Jenny Hudson's tiny room, into Les Brandon's laboratory. She found the bag of injection needles quickly, opened it to make sure they were all there, then snapped the bag closed again.

With it tightly under her arm she made her way silently out of the car. All was quiet. Launn, asleep, was so quiet in the early morning that it frightened her.

Her instructions were simple.

"Stay with the party until you reach Launn," Phillip Jordon had told her that last night on earth. "Steal Brandon's injection case. He has only one set of needles. Meet me in the palace."

He had leaned close to her then, and with one arm about her waist, said:

**Barton flare—colorful rescue rocket used in Earth Rocket system.*

"Don't be frightened, darling. Your husband cannot harm you. I'll be waiting in a room below the palace. You will be met by insect men. They are my friends and you needn't fear them. They will take you directly to me."

She knew that Phillip had followed her all the way from Fitzroy. He had left a note for her there, hiding it cleverly in her compact when she left it on the table in her room.

"Courage, beloved. A few more days and we will be together."

Eve Granger loved Phillip Jordon. Loved him because he was strong and ugly and so full of cold courage that nothing frightened him. She looked back at the car once as she left the park.

John Granger? Yes, she had cared for him once. Cared for him as a daughter did her father. Now she knew what real love was. Knew the strength in Jordon's arms. The fierce impatience of the man. He wasn't handsome as Brandon was handsome, or kind as Granger. He was an adventurer, fearing nothing. A godless, powerful man. Phillip Jordon was his own god.

She hurried, almost ran, toward the palace. She cursed Brandon for interfering last night. If it were not for Brandon, she would have seen Jordon then.

At the palace she didn't hesitate. She went on into the throne room. Her footsteps were loud against the stone floor, and as it had last night, the sound of her shoes against the stone brought the green insect creatures from their hiding places.

She felt herself grow taut and frightened inside. She stood very still while they moved about her, coming close, but never quite daring to touch her body.

"Phillip," she called. Her voice was loud and it echoed through the chamber. "Phillip."

She heard him answer her.

"Coming—Don't be alarmed."

The fear went out of her and in its place, a new warmth flowed.

HE CAME from the shadowy hall behind the throne. His arms were around her and they embraced as they had secretly at his apartment so many weeks ago.

"You brought the bag?"

She looked up at the lean, eager face, the hard lips, and worshipped his strength. She held the bag of injection needles out to him and he took them eagerly.

"Good. We must hide soon, but first, come with me..."

He walked swiftly toward the outer doors of the palace. As he walked, he talked to her. The green insect men scuttled along behind them, making queer noises, leaving those green trails of slime behind them on the floor. Phillip Jordon stopped beside one of the dead guards and put the bag on the floor.

"I must make sure," he said. "I'm not sure Brandon has the right stuff. He's clever—though—perhaps..."

He slipped one of the needles from the bag and held it in his slim, bony fingers. He closed one eye and stared through it at the clear, blue liquid. Satisfied, he opened the cuff of the shirt on the arm of one of the guards. He pressed the needle against the flesh, pushed brutally and pressed the fluid into the arm.

Eve Granger caught her breath, staring at him with fascination.

"Do you think we have time?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'm worried about Granger. He'll follow us."

He continued to stare at the stiff figure of the guard but no sign of life was evident. He drew out an-

other needle, crossed the hall and repeated the process on the arm of the other guard.

Neither of them moved.

Jordon swore.

"They'll miss you by this time."

"I did the best I could," she said, and pouted. "Phillip, you're more interested in those corpses than you are in me."

He eyed her coolly.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you're a damned little fool?" he asked.

STARTLED, she stepped back a pace. Color mounted to her cheeks.

"Phillip!"

"You are," he said. "You think you're the first woman who's ever fallen for me? You're not. I'm just different enough to draw every little slut who wants to get rid of her husband."

Her eyes flashed suddenly. Her fists balled tightly.

"If you think..."

"I do," he said, and reaching out, grasped her arm firmly. "I think I'm leaving here before I'm discovered and where I go, no woman will ever follow. You fell for that sympathetic love stuff on earth, and now you've done exactly what I wanted you to do. I have Brandon's needles, and without them he hasn't a chance of reviving the people of Launn. The secret of Sulphana is safe and my work here is about over."

He twisted her arm slowly, bringing her closer to him.

"Do you like my little pets, the insect men?"

Eve Granger screamed then. Screamed and fainted in his arms. Jordon held her tightly, jerked off the screw top of the empty injection needle and filled it with one hand from a bottle he took from his pock-

et. He replaced the cover quickly, pushed the needle into her arm and drained the tube.

He dropped the girl on the floor and took a last look at the two guards by the door. Life color was mounting slowly in their cheeks.

He chuckled at the sight.

"The stuff is okay, Brandon," he said to himself. "I'll keep it, just in case."

He went back along the hall into the shadows and the insect men followed him like sulking, snarling dogs being led away from their prey.

The girl on the floor did not move.

PEEWEE Hudson was lumbering toward them with all the speed he could make. Over his shoulder was the inert figure of Eve Granger and behind him, as far as Brandon could see, were hordes of insect men.

Brandon's eyes were on the still figure of Eve Granger. Automatically he threw the motors of the car into reverse, backing slowly, waiting for PeeWee to come alongside. He heard Granger shout:

"Fire, Mrs. Hudson. For God's sake, fire over your husband's head."

He heard Jenny:

"For Heaven's sake, Mr. Granger. I never saw anything like..."

The rest of her sentence was drowned out by the sinister sputter of the fire cannon. Brandon opened the door with one hand, watching the insect men close in. They were screaming with fright, dashing about in the street to escape the flame that showered them. Brandon heard PeeWee curse as he kicked a half a dozen insect men away with his foot. Then PeeWee and the girl were in the car and the door was closed. Granger was firing as fast as he could reload the fire rifle. Jenny's cannon was singing a song of death. Brandon threw the car into reverse and they

shot back to the corner. He maneuvered the machine swiftly, opened the jets and guided the machine toward the park.

They had rescued Eve Granger too late. Her body was as stiff as any of the people of Launn. She had returned to them without the case of injection needles. His last chance was gone, unless the needles could be found.

He held no grudge against the girl who lay on the floor. He knew that she needed one of those needles herself, for her body was rigid as her husband and PeeWee Hudson knelt beside her.

"Just like the stiffies here in Launn," he heard PeeWee whisper. "I could feel her tighten up as I carried her."

He heard Granger, his head bent over his wife's heart, weeping softly. It was the first time Brandon had seen a man cry, and it touched him strangely.

The park was close and he drove into it, stalling the motors. It was a sad, desolate party of explorers who now faced the Power without instruments to save Launn.

THE CAR was very quiet. Les Brandon worked over crucibles in the tiny laboratory. John Granger sat alone with his books, trying to read, perspiration standing out on his forehead. Jenny Hudson was beside the bunk on which Eve Granger lay, while PeeWee Hudson stood outside, staring toward the palace and mumbling angrily under his breath. Brandon stood up suddenly and came through the low door into the sleeping compartment. Jenny looked up.

"Did you find something?"

Brandon shook his head. He knelt beside the bunk and took Eve Granger's hand in his own.

It was cold, and the flesh was growing rigid. John Granger came in.

"Isn't there something we can do— at once?"

Brandon said:

"I don't know. I found the hypo mark on her neck. PeeWee says the insect men, as he calls them, had captured her when he mowed into them with the fire rifle."

"Which means that they might have used any of two dozen different injections."

Brandon said:

"Yes! Let's look at it this way. The green men saw Eve inject shots into the blue guards. Later, PeeWee shot the guards, thinking they were going to attack him. The insect men used the needle, just as they saw Eve use it.

"Here's the problem. Eve is in a coma. Her flesh is hardening. I don't understand why, for the formulas I prepared were based on chemicals to soften the flesh and restore life. I hadn't anticipated an accident of this type, therefore I made no study of it. I have only one possible explanation. At least one of the needles contains a useless formula. A formula which kills instead of restoring life. I may be able to revive her.

"It's necessary that we find that bag of needles. Without them we're helpless. In addition to that, Eve found a formula that works on the people of Launn. It will save a lot of time if we are able to get those empty tubes back. If we can determine which one she used."

John Granger was silent for some time. Then he turned to stare down at the still, white face of his wife.

"Heart action stopped, suspended as though in death. Brandon, I don't know. It was her fault, yet, somehow I can't blame her."

Brandon shook his head.

"Would it make you feel any better if I said that I feel the same way?"

Granger looked up with kind, steady eyes.

"It would," he said.

"Look here, John," Brandon said suddenly, "Eve's headstrong and inclined to be spoiled. That's why it hurt like the devil when she took her bad temper out on me. I've spent years behind books and test tubes. Eve loves a good time and adventure. Because I'm not her idea of an exciting type, she's taking her spite out on me."

Granger nodded.

"I know."

"Understand me," Brandon went on, "Eve and I will never get along. I'm going to try every way I know to save her. After that, I'm going to clear out of Launn and leave the field to you and Eve. You and I will never make a team as long as Eve feels as she does. As for me, well," he shrugged, "I can't take it, not the way she dishes it out."

He pivoted abruptly and went into the laboratory. The door closed behind him. For a long time, Jenny Hudson stared down at the quiet face of the girl in the bunk. She heard Granger leave the room. Jenny wasn't soft, she kept telling herself. Yet, she had to reach up occasionally and brush a tear from her eye. It made her angry at herself to express such emotion.

THE THREE men stood in the darkened throne room of the palace of Launn.

Granger said:

"I have never dared explore the palace beyond this room. It is here that the insect men lurk constantly. I believe that they have tunneled into the palace from below the city, and use the palace as their headquarters."

"Good," Brandon said. "Now—it seems to me that at any disturbance,

they make their appearance here in this room before they are seen anywhere else. PeeWee, can you hold them off?"

Hudson grinned. He patted the barrel of the fire gun.

"Bring on the green goblins," he said. "I'll take care of 'em."

"Behind the door, then," Brandon said. "Give Granger and me time to get clear, then open fire."

Hudson took his position behind the heavy door.

Brandon and Granger moved across the room, behind the throne and down a short passageway deeper into the palace. Suddenly Brandon stopped in his tracks and shouted.

"PeeWee?"

Hudson answered him.

"I'm still here."

That was what Brandon wanted. Their voices echoed throughout the palace. Brandon stood very still. Sounds came from beneath them, as though giant rats were running around below the floor. Then from the shadows at the far end of the hall, an ugly yellow face appeared. It was followed quickly by another. The insect men seemed to scuttle out of nowhere, like giant, repulsive roaches, their odd voices filling the place with screams.

Brandon started to run back into the throne room. Granger was at his side. When they reached the room, they both stepped quickly out of range of Hudson's gun. Hudson's fire rifle started to roar a persistent song of death.

Granger's hand was on Brandon's arm.

"Come—quickly," he said.

The insects were falling about them. Hudson's gun continued to spurt fire. The room was already growing quiet once more.

BRANDON led the way back along the hall from the direction the insect men had come. In the corner he found a small door, still open, that led downward. They hurried through it. Hudson's gun was still firing sporadically. The first wave of insect men was dead, but perhaps they would meet others.

Stairs led deep under the palace. Then they came out into a dark hall under the throne room. Brandon felt his way along it silently. Granger was close behind.

Thus far they met no interference.

They came out into a small room. Sudden light blinded them. Light that came down a long shaft from above. Brandon stopped, his hand over his eyes, at first, then gradually he could see.

"Good Lord!"

It was Granger who first expressed their amazement.

The room, though small, was furnished beautifully with rich tapestry, and deep divans. Colorful tile covered the walls and floor.

In the direct center was a duplicate throne to the one above them. On the throne sat the loveliest girl Brandon had ever seen. Her long, blue black hair hung like fine silk around a white throat and over pale shoulders. Her dress was of the finest crimson silk and her lips were like petals, as deeply colored as her garment. She sat on a golden throne, and no one could mistake her identity.

"The Princess of Launn," Granger gasped. "I had not dreamed that she existed. I thought I had found everyone in this strange city. Yet, she is here, hidden in this lost room, waiting as the Prince waits above us."

Brandon wasn't listening. He went to his knees suddenly and picked up an empty, broken hypodermic nee-

dle, half hidden under the Princess' long skirts.

He studied it for a moment, then lifted the sleeve of the Princess' dress very gently. There, inbedded in the flesh of her right arm was the broken needle.

He swore softly.

"If those devils had succeeded in bringing her to life...?"

Something caught his attention and he sank to the floor once more and felt about under the throne. Granger heard him gasp. Then he reached far under the golden throne and pulled something into the light.

It was the missing bag. He opened it with shaking fingers and started to count. Two needles were missing. Eve, he thought, had used one. The other was broken off in the Princess' arm. What of the third? The one they had supposed had been used on Eve. He stared up at Granger.

"At least we have a chance now," he said. "Perhaps we can save Eve."

"Not so fast, gentlemen," someone said coldly.

BRANDON, still kneeling, came to his feet swiftly, whirling around. He heard Granger catch his breath, then he saw the tall, cadaverous man at the door holding wicked looking 'tomic-pistols in each hand.

"Phillip Jordon," Granger said in a bewildered voice. "How...?"

"How did so civilized a person as I manage to be so far from home? Is that the general idea of what you were going to ask?"

Jordon came into the room slowly, his eyes almost satanic, ever watchful.

Granger said no more.

"I'll tell you," Jordon said, "but surely you don't want to stand here to hear my explanation? It's a long-

winded affair, and if you'll follow a few simple instructions, we'll find a much more comfortable place in which to talk over our desires and ambitions."

He made an abrupt stabbing motion toward the door and his upper lip curled slightly.

"*March!*"

Brandon started to pick up his bag.

"Leave the needles here," Jordon snapped. "I was enjoying a most interesting pastime when you interfered. You unnerved me for a moment. In my clumsiness, I broke one of the needles. Later, I'll work on the lovely young woman with more care. I'm interested in such a beauty—alive."

Brandon put the bag on the floor slowly.

"You're a coward, Jordon," he said slowly. "You've got two guns on your side now, but if we ever meet with the cards evenly divided, I'll..."

"Shut up," Jordon snapped. "Now—march."

He followed them out of the room and into the dark passage.

"Follow the wall with your fingertips," he said. "It is quite a long way to where we are going."

The three men moved slowly along the wall. Brandon thought once of trying to escape in the darkness. When he halted Jordon said harshly:

"Keep moving. I hear very well. I can shoot at the slightest sound."

"Better wait," Granger whispered. "We'll find out where Jordon fits into this. Later—we may have a chance..."

Jordon chuckled.

"You may as well talk aloud, Granger. I told you I can hear almost anything."

The hall ended abruptly.

"Feel about until you find the ring," Jordon said. "It's a door. Pull on the ring."

Brandon found the iron ring and pulled it. The big door opened toward him and beyond it was a well lighted area, probably fifty feet square, constructed of huge, rough-hewn stone.

"In the far wall you'll see another door," Jordon said. "That's where we end the journey."

Watching them carefully, he produced a key, opened the second door and motioned them inside.

GRANGER went in first. His eyes were wide with amazement, but he remained silent. Brandon followed, and after him, Jordon locked the door from the inside.

"Nice little home here among the dead," Jordon said. "I like to be comfortable, as I must spend several weeks each year in this ungodly hole."

The place was large, and might have been the living room of any American home. The walls were insulated and painted a neat blue-gray. A huge desk occupied one corner of the place. Beyond it, there were a davenport, chair and small table. There were glassware, a neat bed made up with colorful blankets, everything one man could wish for comfortable living.

"As you see," Jordon said, "there is only room for one to live here. Three of us could never do it, but for a few minutes, you are welcome. After that, I have something to show you."

He moved to the desk and sat down.

"You're feeling very clever and sure of yourself," Brandon said. "You've bathed yourself in mystery

and power and you love the feeling."

Jordon smiled.

"Sit down," he said.

He placed the pistols on the desk before him.

"First, perhaps because as you say, I like the feeling of power, I'm going to share my mystery with you."

"It has to do with Sulphana, doesn't it," Brandon said. "Jordon, the unsung king of the Sulphana trust."

Jordon grinned.

"Hell," he said, enjoying himself immensely, "I *am* Sulphana. I found it, exploited it and let Weston in as a silent partner. Sulphana Inc. is just a front."

Brandon heard Granger gasp with amazement. No wonder, he thought. Weston posed as an honest research worker and led a huge non-profit organization. No wonder Weston had thrown Granger out on his ear.

"Charles Weston wouldn't like to hear you talk that way, Jordon," he said gently. "Weston would be angry."

Jordon frowned.

"To hell with Weston," he said abruptly. "He's just a stooge. I could break him over night. But back to Sulphana. You're sitting on top of the only Sulphana producing factory in the planetary system."

Granger chuckled. He seemed to regain much of the spirit that had been looking for the past months. Brandon thought it was because of what Jordon said about Weston.

"There are no factories running in Launn," he said. "Jordon, you aren't that smart."

Jordon arose.

"Perhaps I'm not," he said. "We'll see."

HE MOVED to the center of the room and went down on one

knee. Pushing aside the rug, he fumbled for an iron ring set in the stone, and lifted a small round trap-door.

"Look down there," he said, and backed away a safe distance.

Brandon went first. He was careful not to get too close to the door. He stared down into a vast, semi-twilight. It was a lower cavern, and the floor of it, as far as he could see was covered with crawling insect people. He shuddered at the thought of being pushed down into that mess. The cavern was packed with them, crawling over and over each other. Then his eye saw one detail that had escaped his first glance.

Directly below him, at the foot of a long iron ladder was a pile of what appeared to be pure Sulphana.

He moved aside and let Granger look at the scene. He stood up and waited for Jordon to explain.

"You once said in a report of yours," Jordon said, "that Sulphana couldn't be broken down into known chemical units. You were right, Brandon, when you claimed it was a natural product of an animal or plant. That hive of insect people is like a hive of bees. They give off a green slime. When the slime hardens, it grows powdery. The dust is Sulphana, the greatest healer ever discovered."

Granger was still studying the scene below.

"But how did you find...?"

"Simple," Jordon said. "Sulphana first came to Fitzroy when I was there on a tour of the planet. I experimented with it and recognized its value. I found an old Burtell caravan master who knew where it came from. He said the natives of the Plain of Parna used it in curing their Burtells when they were in-

fected or wounded. He found the stuff in a storage vat here in Launn.

"When I came here the first time, some years before your first visit, I stumbled onto the insect men. The slime they secreted during their battle with me hardens and I discovered the source of Sulphana. Later, I traced them here and found the main body of workers in the cavern below. When Launn was alive, this must have been a great industry.

"I found that by wearing a metallic suit, I could go down there without fear of them harming me. Their teeth are not long or sharp. Their stingers cannot penetrate metal.

"Weston backed me and we went to work, quietly. That's the story, gentlemen, and I regret that you can't make use of it."

Brandon stood very still, his jaw grim.

"Perhaps we can," he said.

Somewhere outside the room a scream of a returning insect man sounded.

"I think not," Jordon said swiftly. "Wait—I must see if one of my pets has been harmed. They've grown quite fond of me—and I of them."

He pushed the door open.

"Look out, you knock kneed son-of-a-tadpole!"

EVEN BRANDON was taken off guard by PeeWee Hudson's battle cry, as the huge ex-janitor came through the door in approved tackle style. He hit Jordon below the knees and sent him sprawling. One of Jordon's guns flew from his hands and hit the wall. He managed to fire the other and it tore a gapping hole in the wall near Brandon's shoulder.

"Think I can't imitate one of the green heathens, do you," Hudson

shouted. "Take it easy with them guns."

He had Jordon by the coat collar now and was lifting him clear of the floor. He wrenched the other gun from Jordon's hand and tossed it to Granger.

"Better keep this, Mr. Granger," he said. "Maybe next time I won't be lucky enough to get here in time."

The picture of Jordon, hanging two inches from the floor at the end of Hudson's huge arm, was suddenly very funny to Brandon. So much had happened. In ten minutes, so many things had become clear. Jordon, first so dangerous and sure of himself, looked like a dilapidated, sputtering clown.

Brandon started to laugh.

"Good Lord," he said. "Let's get out of here before we all go crazy. We've learned enough for one day."

"I wonder," Granger said thoughtfully. "I wonder if we can learn enough. Now that we know the issues at stake, the battle is just beginning."

"The Melform injection fluid was in both tubes," Brandon said. "That means that, regardless of what caused the deaths of the population, Melform will bring them back to life. Melform was used on both the blue guards. Jordon used a paralysis fluid on Eve. That had me fooled."

John Granger listened attentively. His was not medical knowledge. He was in charge of research work, when and if Launn was restored to life. Now, as they sat together in Brandon's compartment, Granger's face was gray and lined with worry. They had both agreed that the work must go on. That Eve stood a chance of recovery, and even now had been treated carefully and placed in Jenny's care.

"Then I say that we should set up the laboratory in the square before the palace," Granger suggested. "As men and women are revived, we will attempt to explain what we are doing and solicit their help. In a short time, if all goes well, we can establish a large clinic."

"Fortunately," Brandon added, "Melform can be made from a highly concentrated drug I have brought in large quantities. It is one of the simplest of all the types. The theory is to soften the body and stimulate circulation."

PEEWEE HUDSON came from his post at the far side of the car. His face was grim and the fire rifle he had used so often was still clutched tightly in his hands.

"The green goblins don't want to fight," he said. "What do we do now?"

Brandon explained the situation and the plan to establish a clinic. Hudson nodded delightedly.

"Let's get started," he suggested. "Once we get a bunch of these Launn people on their feet, we'll have an army to fight those green hob-goblins. They ain't done with us yet."

Jenny stuck her head out of the upper door and shouted excitedly:

"That Melform stuff seems to be working. Mrs. Granger is beginning to breathe."

They rushed into the car and Brandon spent a bad five minutes with Eve Granger. The heart beat was very slow at first, staggering, and at times stopping completely. Then color started to show in her cheeks. The flesh of her arms softened and grew pink. Her eyes opened.

She saw John Granger, her husband, first, his worried eyes on her.

Tears started to course slowly down her cheeks and she tried to speak.

He pressed his fingers to her forehead.

"It's all right now," he said. "You're going to be all right. You're safe in the car."

Her lips moved.

He leaned close, trying to understand her words. She was trying desperately to say something to him and at last he could hear her faint whisper.

"I'm—I'm sorry. I've been an awful fool."

Granger leaned close and kissed her gently on the cheek. There was no mistaking the flood of color that tinged her face. Granger looked up. There was a suggestion of a smile on Brandon's lips.

THE PRINCE of Launn lay on a stretcher under the warmth of the afternoon sun. The square was large, and the car, with the stretcher at its side, looked very small and unimportant in the center of so vast a place.

PeeWee was in the upper compartment, his hand on the barrel of the fire cannon. Eve Granger, still weak, lay where she could look out the window and down at the scene below.

Brandon, in his white frock, drew a sterilized needle from the sterilizer, pressed the needle to the arm of the Prince and pressed gently. He released the fluid into the dead arm, withdrew the needle, covered the tiny spot with a sterilized bandage and straightened. He stared across the stretcher at John Granger.

"Now—time will tell."

Launn seemed even more silent in those moments. Brandon's wrist watch ticked so loudly that he could count the seconds. Granger walked

a short distance away, returned and placed his fingers on the Prince's pulse. He shook his head.

"The mixture may not work the same in all cases."

Brandon shook his head.

"It has to," he insisted. "Whatever happened to one, must have happened to them all. The results would be the same."

Three minutes passed—then four. Jenny, at Eve Granger's side, stared out of the window with wide eyes. PeeWee was leaning out the open hatchway above, the cannon forgotten. Then something moved gently on the stretcher. The wind? It could not be. The square was still. No breeze stirred.

"His fingers," John Granger said tensely. "Watch his fingers."

Brandon smiled.

"I noticed," he said.

"He's—alive," Granger said tensely.

The fingers, then the entire right arm moved, flexed and bent at the elbow. The man's eyes opened and stared upward. Blank amazement was in those eyes, then came fear, so pathetic that Brandon pitied the Prince from the bottom of his heart.

"You're going to be all right," he said quietly and placed his palm on the Prince's forehead. The man flinched. His neck muscles were working. He turned his head and tried to get escape from Brandon's hand. The body came alive. The Prince moved about on the stretcher.

"Walla," he said.

Brandon looked at Granger.

"Have you any system for the study of their language?"

Granger shook his head.

"None," he admitted. "We have no way of knowing how many centuries the city dates back into time."

BRANDON waited. The Prince sat up weakly, leaning on one elbow. He stared about at the deserted city, then at the two men. He seemed very puzzled at their presence.

"Walla?" he repeated.

Brandon shook his head.

"Can't understand you," he said. "Sorry."

He went into the car and came back with a bowl of Jenny's soup. He took a spoonful and held it to the Prince's lips. The Prince hesitated, then let the hot broth slip down his throat. A broad smile transformed his handsome face.

"Goot."

"That was evident enough," Granger said happily. "Goot—Good—close enough to guess at."

The Prince sat up. He started to struggle to his feet, and then fell back. His own weakness seemed to amaze him. Brandon helped him up. The Prince seemed to be trying to get back into the palace. Both Granger and Brandon helped him, and PeeWee Hudson stayed with the car. In the throne room, the Prince continued to stare around, puzzled, impatient with the silence.

He turned to Brandon and released a flood of odd, tangled words. Brandon shook his head again and the Prince seemed to know what he meant. He motioned toward the long passageway that went toward the rear of the palace. Stronger now, he carried himself well, and Brandon was forced to admit that the man was one of the finest specimens he had ever seen.

They came to a small, metal studded door and the Prince reached beneath his robe and brought out a small key. He inserted it into a lock and pushed the door open. Brandon gasped.

"A laboratory," he said in a low

voice. "More complete than our own."

The small room was well lighted from above. The Prince crossed the room and halted before a cabinet. He opened the door and tried to push Granger inside. Granger got the idea. He sat down and the Prince closed the door. He turned and smiled at Brandon in a reassuring manner. Then he pressed down a number of levers on the side of the cabinet and spoke into a mouth-piece on the door.

THROUGH the crystal door Brandon saw Granger smile. Brandon knew what it was all about. The Prince was talking rapidly. Finally he stopped and Brandon could see Granger's lips moving. He watched the Prince's face. First it expressed only bewilderment. Then gradually, terror once more. At last he made odd little gestures with his hand, as though he had given up trying to understand. He opened the door and Granger came out.

"He's unable to grasp what has happened," Granger said. "He says he fell asleep yesterday on his throne and today he awakens to find two strange people near him. He demands an explanation. I told him that he's been asleep for thousands of years and it seems to frighten him half to death. See how far you can get with the man."

It was obvious that the cabinet was a language translator, of a far advanced design over the simple types used on earth. Brandon resigned himself to the machine. The door closed and he started through the crystal door to the Prince. The Prince's voice, transcribed and changed by the machine, produced pleasing, gentle English speech.

"Your colleague—tells—a strange—story. Tell me—the truth. Tell—

me why you—have come to Launn. Where are my people?"

Brandon tried to speak simply. He knew that the lesson the Prince must learn would be a hard one.

"Listen to me," he said. "This is the year of 2024. Many years ago a legend reached Martian cities that a strange place existed at the far rim of the Plain of Parna. The city, it was called Launn, was supposed to be full of dead people."

He was watching the Prince closely. The man's lips were repeating his words. His eyes were on Brandon.

"No man had the courage to enter the dead city," Brandon went on. "At last my colleague and I came with drugs to release you and your people. You are quite safe now, and it is only a matter of time before the remainder of your city will be freed from death."

The Prince shook his head impatiently.

"I am sorry," he said. "I do not believe. Launn is very much alive. If what you say is true, I would have slept for ten thousand years."

He frowned.

"That would be impossible. I shall be forced to call the guards. To imprison you until further investigation."

Brandon couldn't blame him for feeling as he did. Memories could not live while a man lay dead. Today would be but one day removed from the hour that the Prince fell asleep. Evidently he remembered nothing of what had happened.

"I ask for one favor," Brandon said. "First, you cannot call the guards for they are as stiff as you were a half hour ago. I don't ask you to believe. Let me out of the box. I will convince you."

ANGER showed on the Prince's face. He opened the door quickly and Brandon came out. Brandon led him from the room and down to the hidden door through which he and Granger had gone to find the lovely girl in the room below the palace. He went down the steps swiftly, the Prince behind him.

He pushed the door open and went into the presence of the dead Princess. The Prince pushed him roughly aside and with an anguished sob, fell on his knees before the Princess. His hands sought hers, and came away slowly. He shook her gently by the shoulders, but the body remained still and cold.

Sobs shook his body. He still did not understand that a few minutes before, he had resembled the Princess. That she could be revived as he had been.

Brandon stepped forward and put his hand on the Prince's shoulder. He motioned toward the girl, then put his arm around her waist and started to lift her. The Prince understood. He pushed Brandon aside and lifted the girl in his arms. He turned and carried her up the stairs and out into the square. When she had been deposited on the stretcher, he straightened, turned to Brandon and motioned in a manner to indicate that Brandon had charge. He stepped away a few paces and watched as the hypos were prepared. Never had Brandon seen a man with such a combination of fear and pride etched on his face.

"AND THAT is the story of what has happened on Mars and on Earth since, according to your figures, the city of Launn ceased to live."

Brandon stopped talking for a moment, studying the faces of the

Prince and Princess through the crystal glass of the language translator cabinet. He was warm and uncomfortable in the small box. It had been removed from the laboratory and placed before the thrones in the throne room. Both the Prince and the lovely girl of the hidden chamber sat before him, listening attentively.

"You say that there is no explanation for what happened to us?"

It was the Prince who spoke, finally convinced that the story of Launn was true.

Brandon shook his head.

"None," he said, "unless you can offer one."

The Prince shook his head.

"None," he repeated. He turned to look at the girl. Her hair and eyes were dark and alive. She was, Brandon thought, one of the most charming little imps he had ever seen.

"My sister and I," the Prince said, "are grateful to you both. We will try to reward you as you deserve. Now, let me tell you what I know. It would be ten centuries ago that my father, King Fanta, established his Kingdom here. He chose an isolated spot where his people could dwell without outside interference. Fanta brought the finest builders, scientists and men of all crafts here from throughout the solar system. We were not troubled by war or by petty bargaining. All our time was spent developing a perfect civilization."

He sighed.

"Fanta died, and the City of Launn passed into our care. My sister's name is Fawn, named for the graceful creatures who once roamed in our parks."

Fawn blushed prettily.

"I am Barbic," the Prince said. "I

carried on as my father wished. Never did Launn contact the outside. Never did our people grow restless. If we prospered and went far beyond other cities in scientific research, it was because we contacted no one, fought with no one and spent our days in bettering everything that we owned."

"And a wonderful job you did," Brandon said with enthusiasm. "Yet, during all this conversation, you've never once mentioned anything to give us a clue to what happened on that day that the people of Launn ceased to breathe."

PRINCE BARBIC shook his head. Suddenly he looked tired.

"I have no explanation," he admitted. "It is like yesterday, and I remember it well. I sat on the throne, musing over the day's accomplishments. Fawn was in her private room below, a place where she often rested. I thought of her, and of my people and what Launn had done to make them happy. I must have fallen asleep. When I awakened again, I was lying in the square, looking up at men I had never seen before."

Fawn nodded.

"I also experienced the same sensation." Her voice was low. "I awakened, to look at," she blushed and pointed a small finger at Brandon, "you."

Brandon said:

"There is a plan to be carried out. You will help us revive members of your city. As they are awakened, you will explain what happened and enlist their help. My friend, John Granger has charted the location of every citizen of Launn."

"With his help, as people awaken, they will bring others. The square will serve as clinic. There are over six million souls to be awakened. It will be a long job."

Prince Barbic arose. Tears shone in his eyes. He came down from the throne.

"Although you are unable to understand me when you are not in the machine, I express my deepest gratitude."

His voice broke.

Brandon understood. So did Granger. Brandon gripped Barbic's hand tightly. They went arm in arm out into the square.

EVE GRANGER sincerely thought she hated Phillip Jordon during those days immediately after Brandon saved her from the paralysis drug. Then, remembering him as he had been on earth, she began to wonder if she should help Jordon escape from the cell he had been thrown into by Prince Barbic. Eve Granger knew Jordon well. Had known him long before she met her present husband. Knew that Jordon would be grateful, and perhaps forgiving.

As Launn changed slowly into a pulsing, living city, she had time to be alone and to plot Jordon's release. She found it impossible to look at her husband with anything but pity. He was old, it seemed to her. She, in her youth, demanded more from life than he could give.

Today, one of the rare moments when Launn was a dark, gloomy place and a mountain storm hung over the city, she had ample time to carry out her half-formed plan. Granger and Brandon were at the palace with Prince Barbic. Eve's lip curled as she sat in the lounge of the car, the forgotten book on her lap. Brandon liked the palace very well, lately. Fawn, Barbic's sister, was a very attractive girl.

Eve felt a tinge of jealousy creep through her. Brandon had been interested in her at first. She was quite sure of that. She had spoiled it with

her own sharp tongue.

Jordon was her only chance now. Her only opportunity to escape this new, strange world and return to the luxuries of earth.

She stood up abruptly, let the book fall to the floor, and went into her sleeping room. John Granger had wanted to accept Barbic's invitation and take quarters at the palace. She had refused to go. She liked the car. Here, she was the mistress of the house. She couldn't see Fawn every day and not remember that her own loveliness was beginning to desert her. It made her feel old.

She dressed quickly in whipcoats and boots. It wouldn't be difficult to see Phillip Jordon. She had been into the prison often with Barbic and John. The guards would admit her. She slipped a small fire pistol under her leather tunic and left the car. At the palace she avoided the main entrance and sought the metal door near the rear of the establishment. This was the direct entrance to the cells beneath the palace.

A guard smiled happily because she had chosen to honor him with a visit. He escorted her to Jordon's cell, the only one occupied at the present time.

She waited while he opened the door.

"Thank you very much," she smiled at him sweetly.

The guard couldn't understand a word. He smiled profusely and backed away.

Jordon was at the door in a second. "Welcome," Jordon said. "I hardly expected you here."

He took the pistol she offered him. "I—I had to help," she said. A slow fear welled up within her.

Jordon said, "They'll punish you for this if they catch you."

SHE PIVOTED to face him. Her cheeks flushed.

"Phillip, I forgive you for what you did the other day. I had to come. I love you. Don't you understand?"

She threw herself into his arms, sobbing.

"Don't leave me here. Take me with you. That's why I came. I had to escape. I can't stand..."

He pushed her away from him coolly.

"You know damned well I can't leave here now."

"Can't—leave...?"

He swore softly.

"You'll never understand me," he said. "It isn't that I don't enjoy your company. I simply don't live a life that you can endure. I must protect my interests here. The Sulphana supply has been cut off since I've been in that damned cell. Burtell caravans wait outside the city for my signal to enter and load up. Since Launn became a living city again, they've been waiting patiently for my orders. At least, I hope they are still waiting."

"The Foundation and Weston are going crazy waiting for information from me. We've got to start the flow of Sulphana again."

"But—how?"

Jordon looked grim.

"By destroying every last inhabitant in this city, if it proves necessary."

Eve Granger looked nervously down the long deserted hall.

"We'd better get out of here now while we can," she said. "Later—we can plan."

Jordon looked amazed.

"You're still willing to go with me—willing to live like an animal and fight side by side with those loathsome things in the caverns, just for my companionship?"

She nodded resolutely.

"Wherever you go," she said.

He grasped her by the shoulders and drew her to him roughly.

Her eyes were shining.

"Then I can go?"

"To hell—if I end up there," he said. "Come on."

BRANDON left the dining hall quietly, thinking that he had evaded the attention of Barbic and John Granger who had been discussing the culture of early Launn when he left. Granger and Barbic were so happy at striking upon a simple, universal language that they talked like small boys, without thought of stopping.

Brandon wasn't aware of the sly smiles they gave each other as he wandered purposefully out to the terrace.

He saw the slim, silver clad figure of Fawn at the far end of the terrace and hurried toward her. She pretended not to notice him as he approached, and turned with startled, pleased eyes as he spoke to her.

"Oh! I did not hear you approach."

Wonderful, he thought, how this girl and her brother have learned English in so short a time. Granger had done the job with the language translator. It was a matter of close attention and lip reading. Now she spoke as well as Eve Granger, but with a little lilt in her voice that was her own.

"I'm sorry I frightened you," he said. "I planned to start work on the defense system tomorrow. I wondered if you'd care to accompany me to the laboratories."

She smiled happily. Each was new at this game of hearts. Each hesitant and unsure.

"I'd be very happy."

She made the simple word 'happy' sound like a description of Heaven.

"Good," he said. "I'll call for you in the morning. I hope it won't bore you."

She leaned back against the broad

wall of the terrace and smiled up at him.

"I'm afraid I do not know how to say it, Mister Brandon," she said hesitantly, "but I am never bored when I am with you. Perhaps I talk too much. My brother says I talk all the time. When I have something inside of me, I say it."

Brandon's face turned slightly pink.

"That's the way it should be," he said. He felt like a high school boy on his first date. Eve Granger had been the first woman who ever upset his sense of balance. Fawn did a much more thorough job of it. The faint odor of her perfume in the darkness—the silver gown, trailing about her. "I'm—I'm that way myself."

She stepped close to him.

"Then why don't you say it?"

He gulped and remained silent. He imagined a fish might feel this way when drawn out into the air.

"What I meant was that it was only a short time ago, I awakened and looked up at you," Fawn was saying. He didn't hear all of her words. He was watching her face. The full lips forming into words—the sparkling, mischievous eyes. "I told Barbic then that I wanted you for my husband. Barbic threatened to spank me for saying it, but, I still think I should say what is inside me. Don't you, Mister Brandon?"

BRANDON felt as though rockets were going off inside his head. This was the first time he had gathered nerve enough to see the girl alone, and he had hoped to tell her that she was lovely. Now he was listening to a proposal of marriage.

"I—"

He stopped abruptly and took her in his arms.

Minutes later, she drew away from him gently and tossed her hair back

from her face. Her cheeks were flushed and happy.

"I think," she said in a teasing voice, "that Mister PeeWee Hudson would call that the direct approach, don't you—Les?"

Brandon didn't answer. He took her in his arms again.

JOHAN GRANGER came into the laboratory quickly. He hurried down the long line of white frocked workers and stopped at Brandon's table.

"Les, we've got hell to pay. Eve is gone. Jordon has escaped."

Brandon came to his feet, the high stool hitting the floor behind him.

"Escaped? But how?"

Granger's eyes were hard. His jaw was set.

"I said Eve was gone."

Brandon thought he understood. He couldn't say so.

"I don't see the connection," he said.

Granger's eyes didn't falter from his.

"I'm no fool, Les. I may be old, but not an old fool. Eve has been after Jordon for years. I knew that. I suspect she was with Jordon during those first days in Launn. For some reason, he got rid of her. Now she's helped him escape and has gone with him."

Brandon didn't try to argue. In his heart he knew that Granger was right.

"Where do you think they'll go?"

Granger, now that the worst was told, looked very tired. He slumped on a chair.

"I'm sure of just one thing," he admitted. "Jordon won't leave Launn. His interests are tied up here. He'll try to destroy us in some way. He'll get back his control over Sulphana, or die trying."

"Barbic has the insect men under

control," Brandon said. "Launn has been deserted for a long time. There may be more colonies of the creatures. If Jordon were to release them..."

"They'd cause a lot of trouble," Granger said. "Have we anything to defend ourselves? Can we fight them?"

Brandon shook his head.

"I'm not sure," he said. "Barbic said Launn never fought a war during its earlier existence. I expected an attack by the insect people sooner or later. I've been working here on a gas that could be used to keep the insect people quiet. It dopes them so that they go on living and producing, but do not have the will to fight."

"It's not the insect people that I'm worried about," Granger admitted, "so much as I am Jordon himself. He can't enlist help from earth because it would give away the location of his Sulphana source and bring the whole deal to light. He'll try to fight alone, and Jordon fighting alone isn't a pretty picture to conjure up."

"Poison?" Brandon asked.

"Poison and sabotage of the lowest type. Jordon fought during the Sparta uprising on Venus. He has a reputation for using any means to reach his end. Killed off an entire city once by placing Gangus-fungus in the water supply."

Brandon started for the door.

"I've got to see Barbic," he said. "We'll have to take every possible precaution."

Granger was close behind him.

"Then what?"

Brandon stopped and turned shortly.

"Then I'm going to find Jordon."

“JORDON'S hiding somewhere under the palace,” Brandon said.

"I'm sure of that. I imagine he has tunnels that lead to the edge of the city. Probably the place is honey-combed with the things."

He stood patiently while Granger helped adjust the mask over his face and clamp down the light helmet.

"The suit was used by divers who cleaned the water supply tanks," Prince Barbic offered. "It's constructed of light but very tough metalura. It should protect you from the insect people."

The room was very quiet for a moment. Granger busied himself with the last adjustment on the knee-joints. Barbic wandered to the window and stared down at the peaceful city.

"I feel like a knight," Brandon said sourly. "Going off to fight for my lady. Only I'm going down into the tunnels to look for a rat."

Granger straightened.

"See here, Brandon, I..."

"It's no use, John," Brandon said, suddenly sober. "This is a one man job. There is only one suit, and I don't need help with Jordon. Once I find him..."

"It seems very odd," Barbic said from the window, "that so peaceful a city could be threatened. There is the man, Jordon, and another terrible threat we have not discussed lately."

Granger stared at Brandon.

"The Power," he said. "We've got to do something about that."

Brandon smiled a little grimly behind the glassine mask.

"I think I have a clue to the Power," he said. "There's no immediate danger if I'm correct. We'll find Jordon, then."

Granger was puzzled.

"You've found out what the Power is?"

Brandon nodded.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "It all

has to do with a very terrible tragedy that occurred on earth centuries ago. This is but a repeat performance. I think that it can be avoided if we can escape it in time."

They would have questioned him further if Fawn had not entered the room. She saw Brandon in the odd looking suit and rushed to him. Her eyes were filled with anxiety.

"A courier told me," she said, "you go after Jordon?"

Brandon nodded.

"I'll be back soon," he said.

Barbic, trying to comfort his sister, came to their side.

"He says he is a knight going to fight for his lady. Is his lady proud of him?"

Fawn's shoulders straightened and a smile came out like the sun on her pale face.

"Very—very—proud," she said and on tip-toe, kissed the glassine mask that covered Brandon's face.

"And now," Granger said quietly, "I think it best that I go alone with Brandon to the cellars beneath the palace. I will leave him in the tunnel. We must be very quiet."

THE CAVERN room above the insect colony was deserted. However, to Brandon, it betrayed the fact that Jordon had come this way. Eve had been here, for he could smell her faint perfume in the room. He searched the room carefully, and found an empty chest. Almost empty, for at the bottom was a small mask with a tight rubber band that was evidently meant to hold it on the face. The mask was metal, a type of nose guard used by earth-men who fought in the Spear wars. He guessed that the chest had contained complete suits of armor of the Spear War type, and that the mask had been forgotten or purposely left behind. To back up his theory, the only way out of the

room, other than back in the direction he had come, was through the trap-door in the floor.

He lifted and found the iron ladder. It was a matter of seconds before he stood on the floor of the cavern below, surrounded by the repulsive insect people.

He steeled himself against the sight of them, and felt their teeth grate against the metal of his suit and slide off.

At first they came close, sniffing and biting at him. Then apparently satisfied that they could do no harm, they went about their business.

He stared about the strange "hive". It was probably two hundred feet long cut out of solid rock. At the far end was a dark hole in the wall. A tunnel leading from the hive.

He made his way toward it, stumbling over the creatures and falling among them. In the tunnel he moved forward, feeling his way. He must have walked a mile through the winding chamber when he saw light ahead once more.

This time it was the light of the desert, and he came out on a small ridge some distance outside of Launn.

The cave was hidden by rough cactus growths, and below in a little valley were dozens of small, scrubby looking Burtells, their shaggy ears sticking straight into the air, their ugly, six toed feet planted patiently in the hot sand.

Near the far end of the valley was a large tent and men were going into it.

Jordon's temporary office, he thought, and sat down in the sand at the mouth of the cave where he could watch the tent and whoever came from it.

A half hour passed and a girl came out, slipped a desert shield over her head and came toward him.

Eve Granger, he thought grimly.

She was intent on reaching the coolness of the cave, and he watched her climb the little ridge and come toward him.

HE SLIPPED out of sight behind an outcropping of rock and waited. The girl came into the cave. She was no more than six feet from him. He waited until she sat down, her back to the rock, her eyes on the scene below. Then swiftly he slipped up behind her, held her with one arm firmly around her neck and gagged her with her scarf.

She struggled vainly, kicking, scratching and trying to cry out. Grimly he held on until she subsided and lay quietly in his arms.

"Listen to me," Brandon said. "This time it isn't a game. I'm playing for keeps. I'll kill you if you cause me any trouble."

She nodded, and he could see fear in her eyes.

"You're going back," he said. "John can do what he wants to with you, but you're going back. Do you understand?"

She stared at the ground, sulking, refusing to acknowledge him.

"I don't want you," he said. "I want Jordon. Is he coming back this way?"

No answer. Brandon was growing impatient.

"You'd better talk, Eve. You've done enough already. If any harm comes to Launn because of you, you'll be punished like any other criminal. Why don't you be sensible. Jordon is hard. He doesn't want you. He wants Launn for himself."

He was bluffing, but he saw that his words made an impression on her.

"Aren't you smart enough to know that your usefulness to Jordon is over?"

She looked up at him suddenly, appealingly, as though she wanted to speak.

"Do you know Jordon's plan?" he asked.

She nodded, and he could see that he had guessed right about Jordon. He was tired of Eve, and she knew it.

"If you'll promise to be quiet, I'll take the gag from your mouth."

She nodded again, and he released it. She was breathless.

"Les—I've been a fool—an ungrateful one at that."

EITHER she was a fine little actor, or a change had taken place in Eve Gardner's attitude during the last few moments.

"Go on," Brandon said coolly. "I'll hear it all, then I'll decide if I can trust you."

She smiled a little wanly.

"You're just about breaking my arm with your manly grip," she said. "If I promise not to run, will you loosen your hold a little?"

He did so, wondering if she was stalling for time.

Eve's eyes grew suddenly fiery.

"Jordon is a fool," she said. "A first class one. He tried to get rid of me once before, but I was crazy enough about him to follow him again. This time I wanted to escape but I didn't have anywhere to go. Les, if I tell you something that is very important—something that has to do with the safety of Launn, will you help me escape from this—this sink-hole of Hell?"

Brandon stared at her.

"If you're lying again...!"

"But I'm not," she said earnestly. "This time I'm on the level. I've been square with you from the first, Les. I had to be. I'm a damned poor excuse for a woman, Les. I'm better off away from John and he's lucky to be rid of me."

She was talking quietly, as though discussing a business deal.

"John is a great man. He doesn't

know it, and that's what makes him great. I used to work for Charles Weston and that's how I got mixed up in this Sulphana mess. John Granger was dangerous and Weston paid me to watch him. The marriage was the unexpected part, but in Weston's mind, marriage is unimportant. The big thing was that I must watch John's every move and report to Weston, so that he would be ready to step in and save Sulphana's interests regardless of what happened."

"And Jordon," Brandon asked coldly. "Where does he fit into the mess?"

Her face was warm and flushed now. She had started the story. She had to finish.

"Phil Jordon and I ran around together for years," she admitted. "He's always treated me like a worm, and I've gone back for more." She shrugged, and a shudder swept through her. "Until now, he's always called me and I've gone to him. This time I'm all washed up."

Brandon wondered how much of what she said was the truth. He was inclined to believe most of it.

"What's Jordon up to now that makes him repulsive to you?"

She put her hand on his arm and stared up into his face.

"Don't get me wrong, Les," she said. "Jordon isn't repulsive to me. He's an ugly brute, but I've chased him since I was a kid. I'll never stop chasing him. It was like a habit. It didn't work out, and I'm not going back again."

Brandon knew she meant it.

HE STARED down at the tent. The sun was still high and shimmering heat danced about the dark cloth of Jordon's shelter. The Burtells were seeking shade. No other movement was visible on the desert.

He broke the spell of silence.

"You're telling me the truth," he said. "I'm quite sure of that. It's funny—about women like you, I mean. You make a complete damn fool of yourself, then expect by telling the truth, regardless of how ugly it is, to clean the slate at the first try. I don't know how I can help you. I'd never face John Granger again if I helped you escape. Why don't you go to him. . . ."

"Les," the girl's voice was sharp, yet pleading. "I can't do that. John has been square with me. He's always trusted me. I couldn't tell him. . . ."

He knew she couldn't. That she wouldn't have the courage to hurt him.

"What is Jordon going to do?" he asked.

"He's going to wait," she said simply.

He looked at her sharply.

"Wait—for what?"

"For the Power to return and destroy Launn once more. He said it is coming soon, and that he will have a clear field once more. That there will be no one to trouble him."

He grasped her hands, gripping them tightly. His eyes were suddenly stern.

"Eve—you know what the Power is? Jordon told you?"

She was no longer afraid. She had one ace card left and she meant to play it carefully.

"I know."

"Then you've got to tell me at once. We've got to be prepared."

She pulled away from him gently and he let her go. They faced each other, each pleading silently for his case. Each wondering how far he must go to win the point.

"I've—I've got to get away safely, without seeing John," she said.

"Eve—an entire city faces death, and you're making me bargain for their lives."

She was desperate.

"I've got to get away. I know I'm a coward. I've been a coward, but this is the last time I'll have a chance to drive a bargain. My freedom against a city. Les—will you promise to help?"

Inside Brandon there seethed a combination of loyalty to John Granger and the knowledge that Launn had to be saved, regardless of the price. If Granger found out...

From deep in the tunnel, a sudden rumbling noise echoed and re-echoed. A rush of wind whipped up and the sand blew Eve Granger's dress tightly about her. She fell, crying out, and Brandon drew her back into the protection of the rocks.

THE WIND was howling about them now with great intensity, filling the air with fine, blowing sand.

He couldn't shout above the sound. He stared out of the tunnel and down at the valley below, with wonder-filled eyes. A great transformation had suddenly taken place in the desert camp.

The first gust of wind seemed to have come from inside the tunnel, yet the desert also was in the midst of a violent storm. He held the girl tightly against him, for the wind was so strong that they would have been separated and lost in the storm. Jordan's huge tent bellied out and twisted free from the desert floor. It swept upward into the air and disappeared across the Plain of Parna.

He couldn't see the men below, but he could make out the forms of the Burtells, lying with their heads away from the wind, already half buried in the sand.

He put his lips to Eve's ear and shouted.

"This is no sand storm. It's—it's something far worse. A wind like this

isn't normal."

She nodded, her face close to his chest, choking for her breath. The desert was growing dark. In two minutes, he thought, it will be as dark as night. He stared upward through the haze of flying sand. A huge black cloud was flying over head, straight out across the plain. Yet, was it a cloud? It seemed to drift and break apart, and drift together again. It swept close to the ground and particles of it, mixed with the sand, fell about them. He saw Eve Granger rub bits of fine black dust from her jacket and press them between her fingers. When she stared up at him again, her face was white. She pulled him from the entrance of the cave and back into the tunnel. It was quieter here and the wind in the tunnel had subsided.

"Les—the black dust. We've got to get back to Launn. Jordan told me about the dust. It means that the Power is about to strike again."

FAWN, sister to Barbic and Princess of Launn, was worried. Fawn had grown to love Brandon intensely, with the love of a child who grew suddenly to womanhood and dedicated her entire life and love to one man.

Long hours ago she had watched him, clad in the armor of the diver, disappear into the insect world below the city. Since then the others hadn't mentioned his name before her—had tried to make her think that they ignored him and knew that he was in no danger.

Fawn dressed swiftly, covering her fine, long hair with one of her brother's silk turbans. Her small feet were carefully shod in boots and her gown had been discarded in favor of a hardy hunting costume of shirt and breeches. She was ready to search for Brandon.

Fawn knew little of underground Launn. She knew that the insect men meant no harm, and like giant bees, they had worked for Barbic as long as he fed them and kept them locked safely in their hives under the city. Launn owed a great debt to the insect men. From them, Launn took the powder that meant health. Launn had never known ill health until the Power came to steal everything from them.

Fawn found her way under the palace and past the room where she had sought rest and found sleep that lasted for thousands of years. She felt her way to the end of the tunnel and at last stumbled into the room where Phillip Jordon had secretly stayed for so many months, during his visits to Launn.

At the trap door, her courage failed her, and she could go no further. To venture into the hive meant death unless she was protected. She knew that the insect men had no intelligence, that they attacked with one animal thought in mind—to destroy what they could and ignore what they could not harm.

Fawn sat in that room, waiting for, she knew not what. Hoping that Brandon would return.

A storm came from the mountains. She knew that, for the wind found the tunnel and whipped through the room, breaking the door from its hinges and whipping down through the trapdoor into the hive. She sought safety from it behind the empty chest in the corner. She was startled and badly frightened, for no such wind had ever blown in Launn to her knowledge.

SHE STAYED there until the wind was quiet once more. Below, the insect men screamed in protest against the wind that swept through their hive. She went to the trap door

and knelt there, staring down with fascinated eyes at the turbulent scene below.

Then she stiffened. Voices came from the hive. She heard Brandon speak, but he was far away, and she did not understand his words. Then another voice came to her faintly. Her heart sank. It was a woman's voice.

She wanted to leave the trapdoor, but she couldn't tear herself away. Then she saw Brandon coming through the hive in the armor suit, the headpiece tipped back. In his arms, where he could hold her out of reach from the insect men, was Eve Granger, the lovely earth girl.

A great sickness swept over Fawn and she felt faint. With fascinated eyes she watched them come across the hive. Brandon kicked and fought his way through the milling insect men. They reached the bottom of the ladder below Fawn.

The girl in Brandon's arms suddenly kissed him on the lips.

Tears dimmed Fawn's eyes and she sprang away from the trapdoor. She moved swiftly back along the tunnel, groped her way up the stairs and into the palace.

She hurried through the throne room and down the great hall to the square. Barbic was rushing into the palace. Blank, certain fear was written into Barbic's strong face.

"Fawn...?"

She didn't hesitate, but started to run down the steps past him. He turned and tried to catch her as she went by.

"Fawn—don't go out. It isn't safe."

She hardly heard him, but saw his bubble car sitting near the curb where he had just left it. She knew that he was pursuing her—calling for her to come back. She jumped into the car hurriedly and drew back the rocket release. As the car sprang away, she was conscious of a clear, hateful pic-

ture framed too clearly on the steps of the palace.

Barbic was there, staring after with wonder. Beside him stood Brandon, with Eve Granger still in his arms. Barbic was shouting at Fawn, but she could not hear.

The bubble car shot out into the deserted boulevard and she drove swiftly toward the outer city, in the direction of the Mount of Spawn.

She knew that she would drive forever, perhaps straight to death. Death would be welcome now, to heal forever the deep wound in her heart.

"IT WAS Fawn," Barbic said helplessly. "Fawn took my car and drove away. I tried to stop her."

He stared at Brandon as Brandon put Eve down.

"You see the storm? It is like nothing we have ever had. The wind has gone, but look..."

Barbic pointed at the sky.

Brandon nodded.

"I know," he said simply. "Eve was with Jordon. I promised to help her. Jordon knows the secret of the Power. He told Eve. I think we can save the city."

He stared after the disappearing car.

"We've got to act fast," he said, and turned to Eve. "Help Barbic. He'll protect you until I return. I can't promise that you won't see John. You've got to help us, regardless."

She had control over herself again now. Her face was very pale, but resolute.

"I know," she said. "I was a fool to do what I did—down there. I might have known that you're too decent..."

Brandon blushed.

"Forget it," he said. "I've got to find Fawn before it's too late. Help Barbic."

He left them standing there. He ran down the steps two at a time, his eyes already focused on an approaching bubble car. The car moved to the curb and John Granger stepped out. He saw Brandon coming.

"Les," he shouted. "What in the devil...?"

Brandon ran past him and jumped into the car.

"See Barbic," he said quickly. "There is still time. Eve will explain."

He saw John Granger's face turn dead white and watched the older man turn toward the palace.

"Eve?" Granger said questioningly. "Where...?"

Brandon started the car. He waited impatiently as the bubble car gained momentum and the rocket bursts were steady behind it. He had seen Fawn make the turn toward the foothills.

He looked up quickly at the cloud that hung over the city. It was spreading and coming lower. Brandon tried to nurse more speed from the bubble car. He watched the broad, smooth pavement ahead of him, trying to find the tiny speck of Fawn's car in the distance.

JOHN Granger ran up the steps to where Eve and Barbic stood.

"Eve," he cried, and went toward her.

She didn't falter—didn't back away.

"John," she said. "I haven't time to explain now. There are many things to be done. We must save the city. I've learned the secret of the Power."

He stared at her for a moment before he realized the importance of her words.

"You're safe," he said quietly. "I'm very thankful."

He should have seen the tight little lines on her forehead, the misery in her eyes.

"The cloud is growing thicker,"

Barbic said. His voice was oddly calm.

People in the streets were milling about below them. Launn was a frightened city. A city of children who knew not where to turn for safety. They felt the nearness of the Power yet knew not how to fight it. Launn could not fight, for it could not see the monster that was about to devour it.

"You remember Pelee," Eve Granger said coolly.

Her husband's face suddenly mirrored horror.

"Mount Pelee of Martinique?"

She nodded.

"You read about it one night. You read aloud, about the people of St. Pierre and I said that it was impossible. Surely you remember that?"

He nodded, beginning to understand.

"Launn is another St. Pierre," she said. "The lava flows across the mountain, away from the city. The Power comes this way. I believe what you read about ancient Pelee now, John. Jordon told me that the Mount of Spawn is the Power. When the volcanic cloud comes, the Power follows."

John Granger had heard enough. He pivoted toward Barbic. Prince Barbic was badly bewildered. He had listened carefully and learned nothing.

"Your people must go underground at once," Granger said. "If you go deep and close the entrances carefully, sealing any contact with the upper world, you may save Launn."

Barbic did not question him.

"There are the water tunnels, and the hives of the insect men," he said. "Strong doors protect the entrances. The water tunnels are long and very deep."

Granger nodded.

"There's no time to waste. Read a

proclamation at once over the teloscreen. It may be an hour or it may be minutes. The Power is ready to strike."

IT WAS almost dark among the parks of the outer city. Brandon had to slow down, searching the intersecting roads carefully, desperately. He wondered where the girl would go—why she had tried to escape the city.

Surely she had seen the cloud and realized that tragedy would strike? Perspiration stood out on Brandon's forehead. His hands, gripping the steering rudder of the bubble car, were wet and cold.

He crossed a bridge over the last lagoon and sped straight toward the Mount of Spawn.

"Odd," he thought, "driving straight toward death."

He had little chance to escape the Power now, for he was driving straight into the Power's lair. But Fawn was up there somewhere ahead, and regardless of her reason for leaving, he must bring her back or perish in the attempt.

The air was growing hot and the cloud, laying low, covered the park with fine, black pumice. It started to drift across the road, obscuring his vision. He switched on the powerful lights.

Ahead of him, he saw a car overturned in the ditch, wedged against a tall Sparta tree.

He broke the car quickly and left it, running swiftly toward the overturned vehicle. He recognized the crown insignia on the door panel. He reached it, wrenching the door open. Fawn had driven too fast and tried to turn sharply. She was slumped on the seat, her limp body twisted half around toward the door. A dark bruise was visible on her forehead and her lips were parted slightly. He

lifted the unconscious girl to his shoulders and ran as fast as he could in the blackness of the pumice cloud. Reaching his own car he placed her gently in the seat.

Brandon's face was grim as he sped back toward Launn. The city was hidden in the shadow of the cloud.

He reached the first park, and behind him, a strange light lifted into the sky and reflected on the road. It was accompanied by a roaring explosion.

Mount of Spawn was erupting. The Power was on its way.

The cloud swept away swiftly and the sky and reflected on the road. It that burned beneath Spawn. He could not see the Power, for he knew that it came slowly, like a gas, and no man could see it. Launn had died once before, and there had not even been a pumice cloud to warn them. The last time the Power had come alone, before Launn suspected. He was thankful that this time it had given warning.

There was one chance. The first bridge loomed up before him. Praying that the water in the lagoon was deep, Brandon swerved the bubble car and shot straight off the high embankment into the lagoon. The car hit the water with a sickening jolt and darkness closed in once more about him. Brandon took a deep breath and reached for the girl.

IN THE palace, John Granger stood by the huge door, staring up at the fire that belched from Mount of Spawn. He had insisted on taking his chance, so that he might study the Power in action. Launn must learn to fight back, and the city could do so only by knowing what it was fighting.

Barbic was below the city with his people. Most of them had been given ample time to retreat. The huge doors

were closed and bolted. Granger himself had dressed in a heavy fire suit which Launn's men used to fight the flames that occasionally licked at its buildings. The suit was heavy and the helmet thick. Granger felt safe.

He stood by the open doors, watching Spawn. He wondered if Brandon would reach Fawn in time. He could not help them. It had been Brandon's choice and a man must fight his own battle.

The cloud was thickest now, and Granger turned slowly. With a gasp of surprise, he ripped the mask away from his face.

Phillip Jordon stood near him, his face grim with a mocking smile. He held a fire pistol in his right hand.

"Hello, Granger. So we meet again, and at a very opportune moment."

Jordon was dressed in a thin metal suit and he held the glassine helmet in his left hand.

Granger said nothing.

"Well—talk," Jordon said abruptly. "Talk now, because you'll be saying your last words on this planet or any other."

Granger walked toward him a few steps and stopped when Jordon flourished the pistol.

"You're a damned coward, Jordon," he said coldly. "You hide behind a woman's skirts and fight behind my back. Do you think I'm afraid of a man like you, even when you carry a pistol?"

Jordon's face turned a trifle pale.

"Don't try to bluff me, Granger," he warned. "I'll shoot you before you come another two steps."

Granger took another step.

"You thought you could use Eve to betray us. You hated her as much as you do me, but you knew she was weak, Jordon. You and the whole yellow crew behind you."

"I'm warning you, Granger. One more step."

JORDON'S voice was strong now. He was desperate. He had to use the pistol or give way. His fury was growing.

"I knew what you were doing," Granger said. "I'm older than Eve. I didn't blame her for leaving me—but to choose you in my place. She's weaker than I thought."

His arm was upraised now, the heavy helmet poised to crash down on Jordon's head. Suddenly he took the last step. The pistol in Jordon's hand exploded but before it did so, a bundle of fury released itself from the wall curtains and sprang at Jordon's neck.

Jordon went down and Granger's helmet hit him a glancing blow on the face. The fire charge grazed the heavy suit and exploded harmlessly against the wall. Granger went to his knees. Jordon was lying full length on the floor and across his body lay Eve Granger, her cheek bleeding. The helmet had hit her also, knocking her out.

Granger drew her away from Jordon gently.

"Eve?"

His voice was pathetic.

From outside the palace, a gigantic bomb seemed to explode. It rocked the entire city. Granger rushed to the doors. He stared with horror toward Spawn. The sky above Spawn was bright with liquid fire. The black cloud was ripping itself aside and racing toward the city. Behind it, was nothing but empty, sinister sky.

Granger rushed back to the two who lay on the floor. He went to work like a mad man, ripping the suit of armor from Jordon's body. When it was free, he tried desperately to work Eve's limp body into it before it was too late. At last it was done, he placed the helmet over her head. Then and only then did he once more don his own helmet. He sat there on

the floor, her head on his lap, his arms about her, sheltering her as he would a child.

The windows of the room flew open. A strange, hot wind swept through the building. Even through the protecting suit, Granger could feel it. It came and left swiftly, and almost before it reached him, he was once more cool and gasping for breath.

Was it safe now?

HE LIFTED the helmet from his head and took a quick breath. The air was good, but the floor under him, when he touched it with his finger, was very hot. The air smelled hot and sickishly sweet, but he guessed that the Power had passed. He tried one more experiment. He walked slowly to Jordon's body and leaned over it, touching the man's face with his fingertips. He recoiled, backing away from the corpse, his senses stunned, though he knew what he must expect even before he approached the body.

Jordon was stiff and hard. His face, where Granger's fingertips had touched, was like warm rock.

Hurriedly Granger drew the helmet from Eve's face. He hardly had the nerve to touch her. When at last his finger touched her face, her cheek was warm and alive. She opened her eyes and stared up at him.

She was trying to speak and he bent close to her lips, listening, tears glistening his eyes.

"I—was—a—fool," he heard her voice, low, filled with emotion. "I'm no good—Jordon and I..."

He placed a finger gently over her lips.

"I know all about you," he said quietly. "It's all over. Jordon's dead."

She didn't answer, but he knew that each of them would have another chance, and that neither Phillip Jor-

don, nor the entire world could ever tear them apart again.

BRANDON planned swiftly, frantically as the car sank down into the lagoon. The water must be deep, he thought. It had to be deep, or the Power would reach them.

For a few seconds the bubble car remained dry inside. He saw the cool, dark water fighting to get in. He must wait. Must save every precious second and pray that the Power would pass. He slipped over as far as he could toward the right side of the seat. He lifted Fawn to his lap and held her there. He found her handkerchief and tied it tightly over her lips. The girl didn't move. Her eyes were closed.

He was watching the surface of the lagoon.

Suddenly the water above seemed to froth and turn white. It boiled downward and Brandon held his breath. The heat would be terrific. Could it reach the bubble car?

Water was trickling into the rear compartment. He heard it and hoped that the glassine would hold against the pressure.

The bubbles were receding now, back toward the surface.

Suddenly the glassine window broke and tons of water rushed in. With his foot, he kicked the door open. It took all his strength to do it. He held Fawn tightly with his right arm. He pushed himself away from the car and felt the shock of icy water hit his body.

With a powerful kick, he sent them upward toward the surface. He thought he would choke before they reached air.

Quickly he changed his hold, caught Fawn under the arms and swam toward the shore.

It was a strange, peaceful world that he had come back to. The cloud

had gone. There was no fire spewing from Spawn. Launn, far away, was quiet. Too quiet, he thought, as he dragged Fawn's limp body to the shore.

He wondered if Eve Granger's warning had come in time.

IN LAUNN, there was a great celebration. The people, all but a fraction of them saved from the terrible Power, were thankful for their fortunately planned escape. Although they knew little of the Power even now, they would soon learn, for their friends from earth would soon offer an explanation.

At the Palace of Launn, Barbic had prepared for the greatest feast Launn had ever given.

The dining room was filled with workers, and the great table groaned in protest against the load of fruits and meats that covered its fine cloth. The party was small. Tonight was a special celebration, for it marked the day when Princess Fawn would gain a husband and her many admirers would lose their last chance to win her heart.

Barbic sat alone at the head of the table, as his father had sat many centuries ago.

Fawn, looking a little pale, wore her bandage well and it hid the only wound that the Power had left behind. At her side, Brandon beamed like a small boy who had just caught the largest fish. John Granger was as devoted as ever to Eve, and Eve Granger was, undoubtedly, a changed woman. Never again would she find a counterpart for Phillip Jordon. All the Phillip Jordons of the planetary system were forgotten by her, and her eyes were bright and a little misty as she watched her husband rise and face the huge telo-screen that had been placed before him on the table.

He was a fine man and it had taken

her years to realize it. She had been unwise, and a fool. Now that he had forgiven her—had in fact, saved her life in return for his own, she would never leave him again.

Two more pair of eyes watched Granger as he started to speak. Pee-Wee Hudson had done a good job of herding Launn's citizens into the tunnels, and Jenny had not been idle. It had been her request that she be placed in charge of preparing the royal banquet, and the odors that rose from many covered dishes added the crowning touch to her triumph.

Granger touched the button that lighted the screen and sent his message to the waiting people of Launn.

"The Power can never again catch Launn unprepared," he said simply. "I am not a speech-maker. I am a scientist. I cannot take credit for saving Launn." He turned to Eve. "I would like to present my wife, Eve, who went into the enemy camp as a spy and brought back knowledge of the Power. It was her faithful work that gave us time to prepare Launn and to save its people."

Eve Granger found her handkerchief and tried to dry her tears before the others saw. No one seemed to notice. John Granger went on.

"Many centuries ago, in the old world of which we know so little, a Mountain called Pelee erupted and threw tons of lava down upon the town of St. Pierre. A strange thing took place in that town. Thirty thousand people were caught going about their daily work. When rescue ships came, these people were still there, unharmed so far as wounds were concerned. Yet they were all dead, stopped in their tracks where the heat from Pelee had passed."

H HE PAUSED, wiping his face with his handkerchief. The room was very quiet.

"The Mount of Spawn is a volcano, but as none of us have gone there, we did not know this. Spawn throws the lava away from the city, into the valleys that we have not explored. However, the wave of super-heated air came in this direction. That was no doubt caused by drafts that we know nothing about. All this must be studied now, and understood, for the sake of future generations.

"Oddly, the heat wave does not burn. It passes too suddenly to burn. Instead, it fills the people's lungs and makes them stop breathing. It kills them quickly, and passes on with so much speed that the victims are stopped in their tracks, without any visible marks on their bodies. Death comes so suddenly that they cannot move from where they stand.

"That is our explanation of the Power, and we have no reason to fear it again, for we know what to do."

He sat down.

Barbic rose and went to the screen. His voice was young, strong and confident as he addressed his people.

"I can add little to what John Granger has told you," he admitted. "However, we owe all to the earth party and I am happy that they have reunited here in my father's home tonight. We will be ready for the Power when it comes again, and we have the help of one who has promised to stay in Launn and make his home here."

He looked across the table at Les Brandon.

"My sister, little minx that she is, made a grave error. An error that would have cost her life had not Brandon saved her from the Power. She has seen her mistake, and I believe that Launn will lose a Princess and some day acquire a Queen. Perhaps Launn will be blessed with a number of members of the Royal family, to keep the house of Barbic

alive."

Fawn blushed and tried to look very small at Brandon's side.

"Earth has sent a message which I will read for the first time," Barbic said, and drew a sheet of script from his pocket.

The party around the table looked surprised. Here was something that none of them knew about.

"The message," Barbic said, "is from the Earth Council of Science. I read:

"A full report of the activities of the Western Research Foundation and the work of Phillip Jordon, has reached this office. When it had been confirmed, the Weston Research Foundation will be relieved of its position and Charles Weston and his aides will be imprisoned. This message will serve as an invitation by this council to John Granger, and will ask Granger to accept the post as leader of a group to be called the Granger Research Foundation and to represent earth in all scientific matters as this council's representative. An immediate response is requested."

NO ONE spoke. John Granger took his wife's hand in his and held it very tightly.

Barbic folded the paper and passed it to Granger.

"Sulphana is a valuable drug," he said. "Launn realized this while Earth was but a lonely outpost of the planetary system. Now, earth wants a supply of Sulphana to pass through the offices of Brandon and Granger. Launn will be well paid for the product and our friends will receive their commissions. That is all I have

to say.

"I could thank my friends, but they do not wish to be thanked. I believe that each one has received his just reward."

He sat down, and the screen went blank.

"Now—if Fawn can concentrate on food," he said with a smile, "we will eat."

Fawn blushed and disentangled her hand from Les Brandon's. Jenny Hudson beamed upon them in a motherly fashion.

"The flour ain't so good here," she said. "But I guess those biscuits will be good enough. The ovens have to be remodeled. They're too hot, too..."

PeeWee Hudson frowned.

"Aw, Jenny, them biscuits are the best, and you know it. Stop making excuses. No one pays any attention..."

"You keep your big blather-mouth shut, PeeWee Hudson," Jenny said testily. "I'm not a good cook and you know it."

Prince Barbic, grinning happily, had already sampled his first one.

"I pronounce the food excellent," he said with a show of authority, "and as I'm the Prince of the city, my word is law. Please stop arguing at once."

For a minute, Jenny Hudson seemed about to sputter in indignation at the upstart who questioned her right to speak. Then she saw the delighted smile they were giving her and subsided with a pleased smile.

"Everything's gonna be all right," PeeWee said softly. "Yes sir, everything's gonna be *all right*."

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH!

THE GALAXY RAIDERS

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BUGS VERSUS WEEDS



By William Karney



IN THE WEST there is a plant called the Klamath weed which grows so fast that it chokes out the grass on the ranges, and is injurious to the health of the cattle. Till now the ranchers have been fighting a losing battle with the weed, using an expensive chemical that is difficult to apply. Now they think they have found a better way. That way is the use of the *Chrysolina*, a beetle native to Australia,

which apparently just loves the Klamath weed, for it won't eat anything else. The beetles lay their eggs around the base of the plant and when they hatch, they eat the leaves. The older beetles come out of the ground in the spring and live on the weed when it is in full bloom. The beetles multiply rapidly and scientists believe that in two more years the Klamath weed will be a thing of the past.

* * *

THE BENTHOSCOPE



By H. R. Stanton



THE BOTTOM of the sea holds some irresistible fascination for men. It is the one portion of the world which man has not explored to any great extent. It wasn't so many years ago since Dr. Beebe went down three thousand feet into the ocean in his bathysphere. Most of us remember the reports he made of weird monsters existing at those depths. It seems he had on that trip an assistant, Dr. Otis Barton who became fired with the zeal to go even deeper. The Benthoscope was the result.

The *Benthoscope*, from the Greek, meaning "sea bottom observer", was, or is, a steel sphere five feet in diameter and about an inch and a half thick. It is suspended from a thin steel cable to which are attached phone and power wires. In this pitifully weak little device, Barton chose to go deeper than any human being before him—four thousand five hundred feet!

Because the benthoscope is a sphere it is capable of withstanding extreme pressures and Barton's trip proved that it was adequately designed. There were no leaks through the sphere and its quartz window easily withstood the pressure. In many respects, because of his isolation from the surface, Barton was in the position of a deep space traveler. He even drew that comparison. His oxygen was delivered to him from steel bottles within the sphere. Any tubes projecting down into that depth would have been crushed. Trays of sodium hydroxide removed the carbon dioxide exhaled by him. In other words he was effectively a lone unit with a self contained oxygen supply and scavenging system as would be found in a potential space ship.

Barton, who seems less of an ichthyolo-

gist or biologist than a physical scientist, next plans to repeat the tremendous dive with a trained observer who can analyze to a certain extent and perhaps photograph the weird sea-bottom creatures. His major concern was in the design of a suitable vehicle for such depths. It seems that man can go to any depth he desires, since a steel sphere capable of resisting any sea pressure can be built. The limitation here is the strength of the steel cable. As more cable is lowered the tensile forces acting to separate become greater. What a terrific thrill! To be dangling at the end of a slender wire of steel, with the sphere twirling and bobbing in a fashion to make one sea sick! The power cable failed on Barton's dive so he was not able to see clearly into the intended illuminated depths into a searchlight cone. Never the less, a good deal was learned. Barton intends to repeat the experience, but so far as he knows it is wiser to observe sea life and depths considerably less, because life and living things are more concentrated. At the extreme depths of the ocean it is highly improbable that any kind of sea life will be found unless perhaps some minute bacteria or other life undisturbed by pressure, can live. It gives one the shudders to think of a man hanging in the ocean by such a thread. What thoughts must inevitably course through his mind under such circumstances? What fears must tear at him? Yet, Barton, who maintained telephone communications with the surface apparently remained quite calm and scientific withal. And that is a difficult feat indeed. It is one thing to read about steel nerves; it is another to have them when thousands of feet of water separate you from living beings—death seems near!

VIAL of IMMORTALITY

By Craig Browning

If a vampire really exists, it has to be something scientifically explainable. It was . . . and Dr. Schwick found the answer!

DR. SCHWICK sat in his favorite barrel chair pouring apple cider from a gallon glass jug into a large drinking glass. His overdeveloped paunch, short fat legs, and stubby fingers were belied by his high, intellectual forehead and keen grey eyes.

His wife sat over in one corner of the room sewing on a dress she was making. She ignored her husband and his present favorite disciple.

The disciple was a young man about twenty-five years old, five feet seven, with blond hair parted in the middle and neatly laid on his scalp.

His name was Orville Chadwick, and he had been developing a talent for automatic writing on the typewriter. He was rather thin, due to the diet of potato water and carrot juice he had been living on under Dr. Schwick's tutelage.

The two were in marked contrast to each other; the one thin, with long sensitive fingers; the other stout and bloated looking; with fingers that at first glance seemed to all have been amputated at the first joint. It was only by looking at the eyes of the two that one could tell that the gross man was the master and the sensitive, younger man the lesser intellect.

Dr. Schwick screwed the cap back on the jug and set it on the thick green rug beside his chair. He took several deep swallows of the sparkling apple cider and smacked his lips

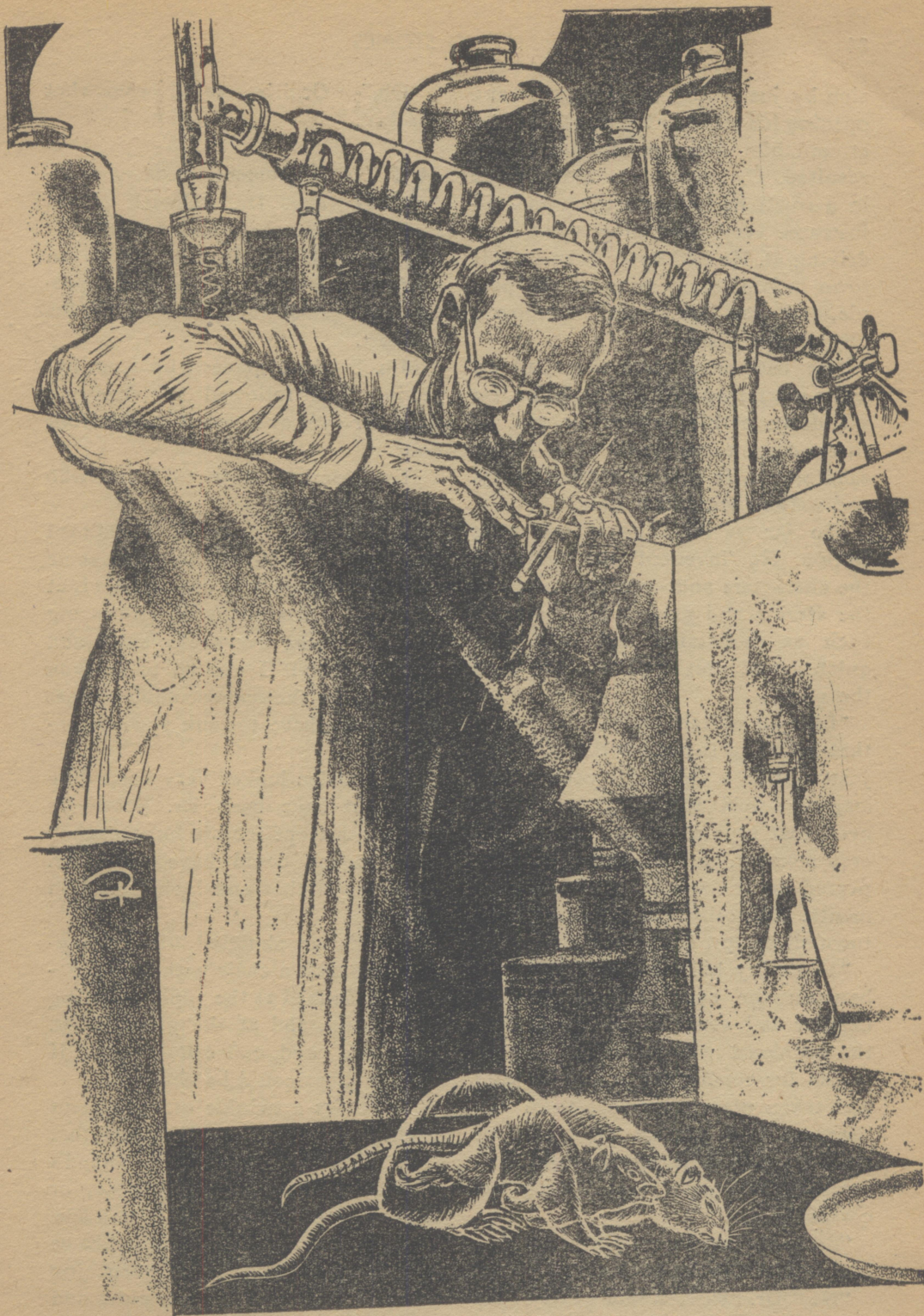
loudly. Then he continued what he had been saying.

"All my life, Orville, I've been hoping someone with your talents would come along. The big trouble with having a talent like yours is that it doesn't carry with it the judgment to put it to the best usage. You think that it is something wonderful to just be able to sit down at a typewriter and throw yourself into a trance and wake up to find your fingers have written out some intellectual nonsense that a conceited spirit thinks to be a world shaking revelation from the astral.

"Pah! You don't have to contact the astral to get intellectual nonsense. Millions of words of that sort of thing are being written every day by perfectly natural agencies. And just because a man has been dead for a century or so doesn't make him a know-it-all. If it did all our greatest scientific achievements would be written and published by mediums rather than by materialistic scientists."

"But what other use CAN I put it to, doctor?" Orville asked. "When I go into a trance I don't know what entity is going to take over. I never know unless he writes out his name. I don't have any control over the matter."

"You can have control to a certain extent," Dr. Schwick replied. "Go places. I knew a writer once who made quite a success of his profes-



In the furry bodies of those two half-transparent rats lay the secret of an evil immortality . . .

sion by just going various places and opening his mind to the astral entities around him. Very remarkable things resulted. He wrote one story while in a small midwestern town that illustrates very remarkably what I am driving at. He had never been in this town before, knew none of the people, and even less about the topography of the place.

"He had only been there a few hours when inspiration struck him. He sat down at his typewriter and in three days turned out forty thousand words. It was a complete story, and written without a flaw.

"So far as he knew it was pure fiction. He 'invented' the names of the characters and even the names of the streets and geographical centers such as mountains and hills and gulches and creeks. The same with the plot.

"Like all writers he let it be known that he was a famous author and had just written a story. He sent it to a magazine publisher who happened to need that type of story right at that very moment, and consequently it appeared on the stands in less than a month. Naturally the natives of the town all bought it and read it.

"The story hit the townsmen right between the eyes! It proved with chapter and verse, so to speak, that the drunkard who had been sent to prison for committing a murder that had taken place near that town was innocent, and pointed the finger of guilt directly at a very upright citizen of that town, even giving his correct name!"

"So he was an automatic writer just like I am!" Orville exclaimed.

"No," Dr. Schwick said gently. "He was a successful author. He wouldn't have been if he dabbled in great revelations from seedy ghost writers. He put his talent to practical use,—entertaining the public."

"Oh," Orville said, somewhat abashed.

AT THAT moment the front door-bell rang. Dr. Schwick placed his hands on the arms of his chair and lifted his mighty frame to an upright position, unconsciously protesting against this invasion of his comfort.

Mrs. Schwick glanced up from her sewing and followed her husband with her eyes as he went to the front door.

His booming voice told her who the visitor was.

"Well!" Dr. Schwick exclaimed heartily. "Dr. Bowden! Come in, come in. What brings you over on a night like this? I thought, what with spring weather giving everybody colds and the flu, that if I wanted to see you again before the summer doldrums set in I would have to look you up myself."

Dr. Bowden looked very much like he might have been Dr. Schwick's brother. Except for his huge paunch Dr. Schwick could have worn Dr. Bowden's clothes and looked well in them.

The visitor shuffled off his topcoat and took a chair without invitation. He looked at the apple cider jug on the rug, and at the glass in Dr. Schwick's hand, and calmly asked if another glass could be obtained.

There was a twinkle of excitement in Dr. Schwick's eyes. He sensed that something was on his old friend's mind, and it must be up his alley or this visit would not have been made. Nor was he wrong. Dr. Bowden came straight to the point after quenching his thirst with one glass of cider and settling back contentedly with a second held in his hand.

"I have a case that has me puzzled," he began. "It's a case more than a patient. There are two patients and

one corpse, to be exact. The dead person met with accidental death while alone. One of the patients has a broken leg. The other is suffering from acute—*anemia*."

"*Anemia*!" Dr. Schwick said in a hushed, meaningful tone. "Tell me about it."

"That's what I came here to do," Dr. Bowden said irritably. "I was first called onto the case by a real estate friend of mine who has sent me patients before. It seems he had just sold a house to some people. They had moved in and he decided to drop around and see if everything was satisfactory. The people were man and wife with no children. Their names were Crane,—Fred and Edith Crane."

"He knocked at the back door. At first he heard no sign of life inside. After the second knock he heard a woman screaming for help. He tried the door. It was unlocked, so he went in and followed the direction of the screams to the basement."

"Edith Crane was lying at the bottom of the steps with a compound leg fracture. He had quite a time convincing her she should remain quiet until he could get a doctor. He called me and I came right away."

"Her story was that she had been on the stairs when a mouse jumped out from under her feet. Forgetting her precarious position she tried to jump out of the way. She broke her leg in the fall down the remainder of the steps to the concrete basement floor."

"**D**O YOU HAVE any reason to suspect she might be lying about what happened?" Dr. Schwick asked.

"No, dammit," Dr. Bowden said. "I think she was telling the truth even yet after what took place later. When I got there I immediately called the

ambulance and took her to the hospital. By that time her husband had come home in response to the real estate man's call to his place of business. He went along."

"Fred Crane, the husband, says that after he got home from the hospital he sent a wire to his wife's sister to come at once. She got there the next day and went with Mr. Crane to the hospital to see Edith. Then she and Fred went back to the house. Edith couldn't be taken home until the next day. Her leg was going to be all right, but I felt she was suffering from shock and should remain in the hospital an extra day."

"About eleven o'clock that evening I got a frantic call from Fred Crane. He babbled something into the phone about Ada being dead. I thought he had gone out of this head and rushed over to give him a sedative, kicking my pants for not realizing that the husband might have been suffering from shock the same as the wife."

"I was mistaken. The sister actually was dead. The evidence showed she had been getting into the tub to take a bath with the water still running. She had slipped and fallen against the tub faucets, giving herself a nasty blow that rendered her unconscious."

"Unconscious, she fell into the tub, and when the water rose as high as the overflow it covered her completely and she drowned. Fred shut off the water faucets, but had sense enough not to touch the body."

"In all cases of accidental death I have to call the police. I did so. They came and made their routine examination. Then Dr. Beasley, the coroner, and I drained the water out of the tub and examined the body more closely. Death was undoubtedly from the causes indicated by the evidence; but both of us noticed an unusual thing about the corpse."

"We confirmed it later, so there is

no least doubt. Although there was the fractured skull and the blood on the tub faucets to tell where she had hit her head, **THERE WAS NOT ENOUGH BLOOD IN HER BODY TO HAVE KEPT A KITTEN ALIVE.** She was well past the stage where death results from cronic anemia! Although she had undoubtedly died from drowning she could not possibly have been alive **BEFORE** she fell into the tub. Contradictory? I know it; but that is what the evidence says.

FRED CRANE insisted his sister-in-law had seemed in perfect health. She had a light complexion and blushed often and easily, so any signs of anemia would have been quite obvious to him during the course of the evening before she met her death.

"There was no reasonable explanation. The slight pinkish tinge to the bath water could have been caused by no more than a drop or two of blood. To be sure, the water had flowed into the tub and out through the overflow for almost an hour before he investigated and shut it off. During that time a great deal of blood could have disappeared. The coroner and the police seized upon the reasonable explanation and ignored the fact that it meant that practically a gallon of blood had flown from a slight scalp wound while the poor girl had remained under water. The wound did not come near an artery, and even if it had it would have taken a good deal more than five minutes for it to flow out, and long before then she would have died from drowning and the blood stopped flowing.

"Nevertheless, at my whispered suggestion they took Fred down and locked him up for the night. I had strong forebodings about that house

and wanted him out of it for the night. Also he was in a frame of mind where he might do anything, with two tragedies bothering him.

"That was last night. Early this morning before beginning my calls on patients I dropped in at the police station to see how he had passed the night.

"He seemed asleep when the jailor let me into his cell, and I would have turned around and left without disturbing him except for the fact that I noticed he seemed much thinner than he had seven hours previously, and his skin seemed almost bloodless.

"Without waking him I felt his pulse. His heart was beating wildly like a pump that has lost its prime. He was feverish. I tried to rouse him, but was unable to do so.

"I called the jailor and had him send for the police ambulance and rush him to the emergency hospital. There I gave him a quart of plasma before doing anything else. Since then I have given him two blood transfusions, and I think I have him out of danger now.

"In the case of Ada, the sister-in-law, it is not too impossible that she **MIGHT** have lost practically all her blood through that scalp wound. If that were an isolated instance I would be forced to dismiss the whole thing on the basis. **BUT** in Fred's case there was nearly the same loss of blood, and there was not the slightest sign of puncture on his skin anyplace. Not even a prick large enough for admission of a hypodermic needle!"

"And you think there may be some force of evil about that house that has caused this?" Dr. Schwick asked softly.

"What do **YOU** think, doctor?" Dr. Bowden asked. "I got the keys to the house from the desk sergeant at the station when I picked up Fred's

things to take to the hospital. Ordinarily I wouldn't have bothered, but I wanted those keys. If you like, I want you to go to that house with me and see what we can find out."

DR. SCHWICK rose from his chair and went to the closet, getting down his coat and hat. His lips were compressed grimly, and his grey eyes held a glint of anger.

With his coat on he paused.

"Tell me doctor," he said. "When you have been in that house have you felt anything sinister or anything about the house that felt different?"

"No-o," Dr. Bowden said thoughtfully. "I can't say that I have."

"You'll be in no danger then," Dr. Schwick said. "But I had better go prepared."

He went over to a glass case on a table by the wall and extracted a wooden cross all of six inches long with a loop of dark string attached to it so it could be worn about the neck, concealed under the clothing.

"This is a cross I picked up in a curio shop in Berlin many years ago," he explained. "It was supposed to have been the property of a scholarly priest who was famous in his time for banishing—**VAMPIRES**."

"Vampires?" Dr. Bowden echoed incredulously. "Nonsense. This is the twentieth century, not the dark ages."

"You're the one that talks nonsense," Dr. Schwick said with a dry chuckle. "When a master of the Black Art like Hitler can make it necessary for the whole world to struggle for its preservation, calling the forces of evil from their sewers to do his bidding, we can have no talk of the twentieth century being any different than the last,—or the thirteenth century either."

He opened the door and stood aside for Dr. Bowden to precede him.

Dr. Bowden was a slow and careful

driver. The two men rode in silence, the one with his eyes on the road and his foot always near the brake pedal, the other with his eyes closed in thought.

After several blocks Dr. Schwick spoke without opening his eyes.

"I've been thinking over what you have told me, doctor. There's no question in my mind but what it is vampirism. If such is the case we must find the body to which the vampire spirit is tied in death and **DESTROY** that body. I am a psychic, as you know. Undoubtedly I will be able to sense that vampire spirit."

"But sensing it and getting it to disclose the body that holds it earth-bound are two different things. All the histories of vampirism are universal in their insistence that the vampire is aware of its vulnerability through destruction of the body it inhabited in life, and clings to in death; and that a vampire will never willingly disclose the location of that body."

"Then how are you going to find out?" Dr. Bowden asked skeptically.

"I think it would be best for me to play on his vanity," Dr. Schwick said slowly. "If I can get him to talk a lot he may unwittingly give away that secret. I assume that the body *must* be either in the house itself, or buried somewhere very near the house. Of course, to simply look for the body is out of the question except as a last resort. We would have to dig at least six feet under every square foot of the basement and the yard around the house, then find later that it is hidden six feet under just across the property line in a neighbor's yard."

"What I intend to do specifically, if I can, is talk to this spirit and plant the idea of writing his story. Then I can use my friend back at the house, Orville Chadwick. I can paint an alluring picture of how nice it

would be for this vampire if he were famous and people by the dozens came to the house where he is. He could practice vampirism to his heart's content then.

"In order to do that I am going to have to hold nothing but simple, friendly thoughts toward him in my mind, and that will be hard to do after the story you told me of his doings."

"Thank God I'm not psychic!" Dr. Bowden said fervently.

"I thank God for that myself," Dr. Schwick said. "Otherwise you might have fallen victim also, and the vampire would still be unsuspected. There's no telling how many victims he has had already."

DR. BOWDEN brought the car to a stop at the curb before a dark unlighted house that stood fifty feet back from the road.

It was a two story house with a high peaked roof that bespoke of a large attic. Trees partly hid it from view, and the street light a block away did little to drive back the darkness of the moonless night.

The nearest house was a half a block away. A vacant lot was on either side of the place. And as the two men turned their backs on the parked car and walked toward the house they pulled their coats up more closely around their necks, although the night was warm and humid.

Their footfalls echoed eerily on the concrete walk and seemed to rebound from the house ahead with thundering echo.

The trees on either side of the walk were motionless, and not a breath of air disturbed the silence of the night.

While Dr. Bowden fumbled with the key to the door Dr. Schwick looked around him. Suddenly two

gleaming eyes appeared around the corner of the house to the right. They stopped and remained motionless and unblinking.

As Dr. Bowden succeeded in unlocking the door and swinging it open a faint mewing sound came out of the darkness from the direction of the shining eyes.

From a great distance the mournful howl of some dog added to the air of sinister horror that hung over the house like a visible cloak. And just before Dr. Schwick stepped past the threshold into the house the two shining eyes in the darkness winked out with sudden abruptness.

Dr. Schwick could hear his companion's hands rubbing against the plaster as he looked for the light switch.

"Don't turn the light on yet," he said. "Here. I have a small fountain pen light. It will enable us to see well enough."

He fumbled in his vest pocket and brought out a small flashlight. It lit up, casting an eerie glow over the room.

Long shadows lurked behind chairs, peeking out at the two muffled figures. Dr. Schwick stood rigid in an attitude of listening, his hand resting on Dr. Bowden's shoulder.

Then his eyes widened. In the doorway across the room from him the darkness was swirling and gradually something solid was taking shape.

He knew from the laxness of Dr. Bowden's shoulder that he was unable to see it. But it was there.

Slowly the blackness of the space in the doorway to another part of the house was spiralling and settling into the form of a person.

As it settled more and more a part of the darkness seemed to separate, and a face appeared. It was the face of a woman!

HER SKIN was smooth and flawless, relaxed as in sleep and incredibly white. Her eyes were pools of night, and her slender figure was hidden under a long cloak that fell in straight lines to the floor.

Dr. Schwick could feel her thoughts probing his, and he reached toward her with his mind, his thoughts friendly,—those of a father toward a daughter.

She smiled and moved slowly toward him. Her hands came out from her cloak as she walked. They were long and slender. As she drew near she held her arms up as if to embrace him. He could see her gleaming teeth in the faint light cast off by the small flashlight. They were small and pointed like needles.

Dr. Schwick suddenly felt a warm glow emanate from the cross hidden under his shirt. At the same time an expression of pain crossed the face of the woman and she sprang back.

She recovered, but did not attempt to come close again. Instead, she looked at him half fearfully and with a new respect.

Until then the doctor had not spoken. Now his voice sounded; soft and with soothing tones.

"You must be so lonely here with no one around."

"Yes, I am," she answered. "It is so seldom that anyone comes, and when they do they don't remain for very long. I get so very lonely, and I love people so very much."

"That is why I have come to see you," Dr. Schwick said pittingly. "I have a plan for you so that people will always be coming to be near you and feel your presence even when they can't see you as I can. Would you like that?"

"Oh, yes!" she said eagerly. "That would be so wonderful. Then I wouldn't have to hurt anyone. I don't like to hurt people and drive them

away. I want them to stay and talk."

An expression of pain crossed her mask like face. Her beauty was beyond description, and her eyes were dark depths that seemed to open into infinite space where no light could shine.

"I have a friend," Dr. Schwick said slowly, "who is able to step out of his body and let you enter and use it. That body is trained to run a typewriter. You could USE that body and write the story of your life. Then people could read it and learn about you. You would become famous and people would come every day. Not many, but enough to keep you strong and happy. Would you like that?"

"Oh yes!" she exclaimed. She held up her arms and started toward the doctor again. The cross warmed up slightly and she stepped back.

"If I bring this friend you must promise not to drink of his life," Dr. Schwick warned. "If you did he would weaken and be unable to write, and then people could not read your story and no one would come."

"I promise. Oh, I promise," she breathed. "I would do anything to have people come to see me."

"Then be ready for us tomorrow night when it is dark."

Dr. Schwick pulled on Dr. Bowden's shoulder, and backed slowly toward the door.

WHEN THEY were once again in the car and the blocks were speeding by that took them farther and farther from the house, Dr. Schwick took a handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

Dr. Bowden chuckled doubtfully.

"You know, doctor," he said wryly. "If I hadn't known you for years, and if I had any other good explanation for all this, I would think you were crazy. Back in there you carried on a one sided conversation for all the

world like you were actually hearing someone answer. Who was it? Man woman or child?"

"It was a woman," Dr. Schwick said weakly. "The most beautiful woman in the world. And I have to kill her if I can. Not only to prevent her from finding more victims, but also to send her where she belongs."

He was silent for awhile, then he went on.

"You see, doctor," he said. "Back in the dark ages vampires were adepts in the Black Brotherhoods. They received skilled instructions in their art. Through the systematic efforts of the Church their ranks were decimated until only here and there could one be found. Finally the art died out, largely, and only appears today when some adept of Evil rediscovers it, or some untrained soul stumbles onto it. This woman is I believe one of the latter. She evidences none of the evil atmosphere of the adept Black Brother. She is simple like a child is simple, and sees no wrong in what she does. Perhaps she isn't aware of doing it, but has rationalized it into something natural and human."

"Her body must be found so that she can be set free. Otherwise she will be chained here forever. I don't doubt we will find that this neighborhood has had a long series of strange deaths over the past few years, all unaccounted for. And they can all be laid at the door of this house! That should quiet your natural skepticism eventually. We can't wait for that though. Tomorrow night I'm bringing Orville Chadwick with me and giving him his first chance to put his gift to a practical use."

"Do you want me along?" Dr. Bowden asked as he turned onto the street where Dr. Schwick lived.

"Oho yes!" Dr. Schwick exclaimed. "I don't think I would have the courage to go through with it without

you. You see, actually I'm scared to death of that woman. You would be too if you could see her. And since you can't see her you are able to stand on solid mental ground. You don't know what it means to my courage when she is slowly inching her way toward me, and I know that except for this cross magnetised and charged against vampires I would be helpless against her, to feel the calm material sensibleness of your unperturbed shoulder under my hand. Of course I want you along."

THE NEXT evening shortly after the last traces of twilight had fled, leaving a moonless, overcast sky which hung over the landscape like a cloak of black mystery, Dr. Bowden's car again drew to the curb before the house.

This time Orville Chadwick accompanied the two doctors, his portable typewriter firmly gripped in his right fist.

As they neared the house a dark shadow glided swiftly toward them out of the darkness ahead. Dr. Bowden snapped on his flashlight. It revealed a large, dilapidated looking tom cat with tawny green eyes. One of its ears was split from some fight long ago.

It spit at the light and backed into the darkness. When the doctor shut off his flashlight the cat returned, signalling its friendliness with a plaintive mew.

Its glowing eyes kept pace with the three men, and when they paused at the front door it selected Orville as the object of its affections and rubbed ecstatically against his legs, its purring noise loud in the stillness.

When the men entered the house the cat went in with them, darting past Dr. Schwick's kicking foot as the doctor tried to prevent his entering. Inside, the cat stayed well away

from the men so that it was impossible to catch it and put it out.

In the light of the flashlight Orville chose a side table against one wall. There was a small table lamp on it. He turned this on and set up his typewriter with a small pile of blank paper next to it. Then he sat down in front of it and closed his eyes.

To the eyes of Dr. Bowden it merely seemed that after a few moments Orville opened his eyes and commenced typing rapidly. But to the eyes of Dr. Schwick something strange and unearthly transpired.

Almost immediately after Orville closed his eyes Dr. Schwick saw a pale cloudy substance that seemed to rise slowly from the still form of the young typist. It seemed to be flowing out of the region around his left ear and settling slowly to the floor, piling up until it reached a height of better than five feet.

Within this faintly luminous cloudy area were slow swirlings and spiralings which swiftly took form until an exact replica of Orville stood beside him, connected to the seated form by a thin pencil of white which momentarily lit up so that its glow seemed to cast shadows and light through the room. Then it died down to a pale yellow which pulsed slowly as if in time to the heartbeat.

Then out of the darkness a figure approached the seated man until it stood just behind him at his right shoulder. Folds of the dark cloak that shrouded the vampire creature rose over the seated man, and long, slender hands emerged to poise above his head.

Slowly they descended until they rested just above his scalp, and then they went inward until they seemed buried, and only the wrists showed.

A galvanic shock spread through the seated figure and his hands came

to life at the keyboard of the machine. A few stacato raps sounded experimentally, and then the typewriter vibrated to the rapid typing of those trained hands, now controlled by the strange thing out of the mystery and darkness which one man could see and the other could not.

And as the typewriter worked in monotonous rhythm a strange story unfolded. As it unfolded both doctors leaned forward to read it as fast as the words appeared.

AT LAST I can write my story! You, the reader, whoever you may be, can't know what a relief that is;—but you will when you know what I am. You'll notice I said **WHAT** I am, and not **WHO** I am. You see, I am really nobody, although I am several things including people. I'm also a cat,—a big mangy tomcat that comes yowling for his breakfast at the back door every morning. Also I'm two mice that live in the basement and are deathly afraid of the big cat, although actually he is too lazy to catch me,—I mean the mice that live in the basement.

It's all rather confusing even to me at times. Sometimes I think I must be the spirit of some person who died in this house long ago who doesn't remember anything about it now; but the mind is so tricky. Take yours, for instance. Is it located in your brain? You think so? How do you know? When it thinks does it know **WHERE** it thinks? No! It just knows **THAT** it thinks.

Actually your mind could be doing its thinking on the moon, for all *you* know, and you would never be the wiser so long as the senses through which you became aware of things operated from your body alone. The brain could be a two way robot control running the body and in contact with the seat of thought on the moon.

It can't be proven that such isn't the case.

In my case I have the same trouble, but with added complications, because the members of the "body" that I call mine for the same reason you call your little finger "yours" are not all physically connected, but able to move separately in space and independently.

For example, the cat. He is to me like one of your fingers is to you. Through the sense of touch you are able to perceive things in a certain way and in certain detail through your finger. Also, by an effort of will, you can manipulate the things within reach of your finger to a certain extent. I do the same through the cat.

He has a certain degree of freedom and does certain habitual things when I am not exactly concentrating on him, just as your finger has a certain amount of involuntary muscular action and does certain habitual things without your thinking of them at all.

And when you concentrate your attention on your finger exclusively, letting the rest of your body and senses idle, so to speak, I doubt if your finger is any more aware of the assumption of control over it than the cat is when I concentrate my conscious mind and will in him.

I can at will "become" the cat in exactly the same sense that you can at will "become" your finger,—making its every feeling fully conscious, and its every slightest move completely under the control of your will.

You do it through the connecting nerves from the finger to the brain. I do it—well I don't know HOW I do it. I don't have any connecting nerves from the cat to "me" that I know of nor do I know "where" I do my thinking.

I don't even use nerves to feel through unless they are in living

things. I can be aware through the banister on the stairs just as keenly as through the hand that touches it.

I CAN feel the hand touch the rail and the rail touch the hand, just as you can feel your hand touch your chin and your chin touch your hand when you rub your chin. There's no real difference except that you do it through neural force and I do it through something that I don't know any more about than you do.

But I'm not going to let my story degenerate into a philosophical discussion that can't get anywhere. You can argue about whether a fish thinks and has a conscious mind and not get anywhere. People HAVE done that seriously. Well, I DO think, and I *have* a conscious mind, and I *am* telling my story, or about to do so. I've just been explaining about myself because I doubt if you would get any sense out of the story otherwise.

I'd better do just a little more explaining. You might say that I'm the spirit of a house, because my awareness through inanimate things centers about the house and the grounds and doesn't go any further. Yet my awareness through the things that live in the house extends even when they go a long ways away. Also it penetrates slowly into new things that move into the house.

With new furniture it takes a few weeks for me to be aware through it. With people,—well; some of them become a part of me right away. Others seem to have a shell about them that makes them to me what a pebble would be to your digestive system. You'll see what I mean; and before I get through telling my story you'll probably realize I DO exist, and that there are millions of thinking, conscious—entities, for want of a better term, that are just like me. It may

well be that YOU are a part of one without having ever suspected it before!

One more thing. The little finger on your right hand can't become directly aware of the little finger on your left hand. It can reach over and touch it, twine itself about it, etc., but can't reach through that system of neural channels and "contact" it directly and mentally. To be sure, it can work in harmony with its mate in the operation of typing, playing the piano, and other things; but that is through obeying the central intelligence. And it obeys the central intelligence without being aware that it is doing so. It's a one way circuit.

In the same way, I am aware through the cat and the mice, and can coordinate their moves just as you coordinate the movements of your two hands; but the cat and the mice and the people and the house that are ME can't be aware of me or reach up into my mind and be aware of the other members of my "body" any more than your two hands can.

You might say, "Well, if you are so common, why don't more entities like you use some person that is to you like a hand is to me, and tell their story?"

To that all I can say is, "You'd be surprised. YOU'D BE SURPRISED!"

And now to my story.

MY FIRST memories are of spring; beautiful, wonderful spring with a breeze rattling the windows and doors, the two mice in the basement scurrying about caring for their new family of seven little mice, and the big old mangy tom cat under the back steps eating a robin he just caught,—with the smell and taste of fresh, warm blood.

Ah! It was wonderful! Those are my first memories. Not my first, real-

ly; but the first I care to recall.

Why SHOULD I recall anything before that. It was all a mistake. Anyway, the people were afraid of me. ME! Imagine that! But what right have you got to ask me about that? Answer me! Listen to me, reader. You are only supposed to read my story, not start asking questions. Just remember that and not be so curious about what happened to the people that used to live here. The real estate people wouldn't tell you, so why should I? I didn't do anything to them. They did it to themselves. Maybe I helped them just a little, but not much.

Anyhow—

While the cat was under the back porch eating the robin I felt foot steps on the front walk and pricked up my ears. Maybe the for rent sign was going to entice—I mean bring some new owners.

A pleasant feminine voice was talking.

"Oh, isn't this house just darling, Fred?" it said. "That roof is so cozy looking the way it sweeps down and protects the house with its wide eaves. I think it would be perfect with a coating of green shingle stain and all that moss scraped off."

"Roof's in excellent shape." That was Mr. Harris, the real estate man. He had sold me—I mean the house, four or five times already.

"Nice approach." The new voice was Fred. "That front porch and steps really set off the house. I like it, don't you too, Edith?"

"I love it," Edith said, her voice purring with anticipation. "The two maple trees protect the house from the sun, and look at those lovely flowers. The lawn needs mowing, but its thick and healthy."

"Intended to get a boy over to mow the lawn this morning," Mr. Harris said. "I'll see that it's done before

you move in."

"If we buy it," Fred corrected with a chuckle.

"I don't think you'll pass it up," Mr. Harris said confidently. "It's a steal at three thousand. If I had the money I'd buy it myself instead of selling for the owner. He needs the money badly and priced it for a quick sale."

THE QUICK nervous stride of feminine shoes went tap-tap-tap up the front steps to the porch. It sent shivers of ecstasy through the steps.

The mangy old tomcat under the back steps lifted his head from the robin and pricked up his pointed ears while he licked the blood off his whiskers thoughtfully.

The heavier strides of the two men followed, and a key scraped in the front door lock, then turned with a snap and the door swung open.

A few cautious footsteps took the three past the threshold, then there was quiet.

I knew what was going on. You do too. It's funny how people are so materialistic in their thinking and beliefs, yet will pause on a doorstep and probe with their psychic tendrils like a half blind insect waving its antennae.

Edith shivered half doubtfully.

"What a musty feeling this house has," she exclaimed.

"Just needs a little airing out," Mr. Harris said hastily. "You know how it is. When a house is lived in the housewife opens the windows to air the place out, but when it's vacant we have to keep the windows all closed to protect the place from vandals and the weather."

"Sure," Fred agreed. "That's all it is, Edith."

Fred was smoking a pipe. The velvety drapery of tobacco smoke

drifted across the room and blended into the dance of glistening dust particles in the light that streamed in through the windows.

"Solid oak flooring throughout the house," Mr. Harris pointed out. "You don't find that ordinarily in anything under five thousand."

"The front room is just perfect," Edith said. I could tell she was making an effort to shake off her fear. Her mind was telling her that of course the house needed airing. "Don't you like the way that archway divides the dining room from the bigger front room without really separating them?"

"This house was designed by an architect," Mr. Harris said. "So many houses are just put together by a carpenter without any architectural sense. Notice how handy these two closets are on either side of the front entrance. Twenty guests could hang their wraps there without crowding."

"Very nice," Fred approved.

"We have three doors," Mr. Harris explained. "The one on the right leads to the kitchen. It's a swinging door. The center one leads to the back hall which opens on the downstairs bathroom and master bedroom. This one on the left is to the study, music room, library, or sewing room, —whichever you want to call it, a nice nine by ten room with large windows in it."

HE OPENED the door to it and led the way. He pointed out the closet without opening its door. Another door led to the back hall without having to re-enter the front of the house.

"Everything's designed to be handy," Mr. Harris said, waxing warm to his subject. "The bathroom is accessible to the front of the house, the study, the kitchen, the master bedroom, or even the upstairs, without

having to cross any other part of the house. It's a little clumsy the way the door to the stairs opens up against the bedroom door here, and if I owned the house and intended to live in it I would just take the door to the upstairs off and stick it in the basement. The owner was going to do that, then decided against it because he never used the second floor and this door kept the heat from going up. Cut's down on fuel."

He led the way into the kitchen.

"The cellar stairs are right under the ones to the second floor," he said. "Notice how handy the kitchen is. No extra miles of walking in THIS kitchen. Cabinets galore, too. A place to put everything. No breakfast nook, but a nice airy window with plenty of space for a breakfast table. Nice back porch."

He threw open the back door to show them. The mangy old tom cat came out from under the back steps and took the steps in one leap.

His tawny eyes sized Edith up professionally and rubbed against her nylons with just the right shade of pathetic loneliness to touch a warm spot in her heart.

"Oh yes," Mr. Harris chuckled. "He goes with the place. Been here since he was a kitten. Won't leave."

Edith picked him up and he settled down in her arms with his motor purring loudly. Happily content, he licked the last vestiges of robin blood from his whiskers.

"Two car garage," Mr. Harris said deprecatingly, pointing to it on the back of the property. Then he led the way into the kitchen.

"Upstairs are two bedrooms," he said. Then, giving Edith a sly look he added, "Plenty of room for the family to expand." He gave her another look, decided the humor of his remark had been lost, and turned his mind back to the practicalities of sell-

ing the house. "Solid oak flooring upstairs, too," he tossed at them as bait to make them interested.

Edith shivered.

"What's the matter, honey?" Fred asked her.

"I don't know," she said, laughing. "I guess the cat—what's his name anyway?"

"I don't know," Mr. Harris said. "Call him Tom if you want to. That's what I call him."

"I guess," Edith continued, "that Tom must have made me shiver."

Mr. Harris led the way upstairs, followed by Edith, carrying Tom, and her husband Fred.

"All plastered walls and ceilings all over the house," Mr. Harris said. "The house is a steal at three thousand." Cannily, he stopped talking to give this hint a chance to do its work.

I could sense what was going on in their minds. Edith was thinking of her sister Ada, out of work and wanting to come to the city to look for a job. A conflict there,—

Fred was thinking of the double garage. It would be nice to have two cars. He was wondering a little about the lowness of the price for the house, but not too much.

The mangy old cat was dreaming of the return of days when he would get a regular morning saucer of milk and have a soft chair to curl up in.

Mr. Harris was feeling sorry for Fred and Edith. "Business is business," he kept repeating in his mind to drown out the urge that made him want to tell them about—well, about the peculiar coincidence of so many things happening to the people who moved into this house.

I whispered into his mind that coincidences have a way of running out and that THIS time everything might work out O.K.. He seemed quite happy about this thought, but I had to spoil his happiness by chuck-

ling afterwards. This made him frown. He hid the frown by starting downstairs.

WELL, NO definite decision was reached in the house. Edith dropped the cat reluctantly on the front porch as they left.

I began to wonder if they had decided against it after a couple of days passed without them coming back. But on the third day interior decorators came and loafed around, managing to do an incredible amount of painting without exerting themselves. I ignored them.

Three days after that a moving van stopped in front. I moved the mangy old cat around to the front of the house behind a shrub and watched what went on.

Edith drove up and unlocked the front door with a proprietary air. After that there was a bustle of activity all over the place.

A boy came at noon and mowed the lawn. The meter man came and turned on the lights. The water department truck drove up and a man turned on the water.

At five o'clock another truck came and a man put in a telephone. By that time Edith was busy in the kitchen, taking dishes out of barrels, pots and pans out of boxes, and food out of the carton the moving men had taken out of her car.

At six when everything had quieted down somewhat there was a light step on the front porch and Fred came in.

"I'm home, honey," he shouted.

Edith bustled out of the kitchen, her mind purring with happiness. It was a very touching scene, *but* I've seen it before. Impractical. I like the practical outlook in life. Something like the cat's. Direct and to the point without a lot of flowery sentiment. However there was nothing I could do about it yet.

Just as YOU can't teach yourself control over your muscles in a day so that you can bowl a perfect score or play a perfect game of tennis or swim as fast as a world champion. I too have limitations which only time can erase. Time and patience. They conquer all.

IT WAS the next day that Edith broke her leg by falling down the cellar steps. Don't blame *me*. It was her fault, really. I only intended to scare her a little.

You see, I knew she was going to go down to the basement, so I had the little papa mouse climb half way up the steps. When she opened the cellar door I suggested to him that if he remained still she wouldn't see him.

Then when she was on the step above him I told him if he didn't run he might get stepped on. He ran, all right.

It frightened Edith so much she forgot where she was and jumped like there might be a table or a chair handy to land on. When she came down her leg caught crooked and snapped. The fall down the rest of the steps with that broken leg made her pass out.

It's to my credit, I suppose, that I reached out and put the idea into Mr. Harris's mind that it would be a good time to drop around and see how the new owners were faring. He arrived shortly after Edith came to. She heard his knock and screamed like all getout.

The look on his face when he stood at the head of the stairs and saw her laying there with her leg all twisted was something to look at. He looked like he had done it himself. I watched the whole thing through the eyes of the little mama mouse where she hid behind a lump of coal near the furnace.

Mr. Harris had quite a time convincing Edith she had to remain where she was until the doctor came, but on his solemn promise to come right back she let him go up into the kitchen and phone for the doctor and her husband.

Well, they hustled Edith off to the hospital on a stretcher and Fred went with her. He came back about ten o'clock that night looking like he had been on a week end drunk and it was Monday morning. He hadn't been drinking at all. That was just the way he looked.

I had some fun that night for the first time in quite a while. Whenever he went to sleep I painted him a picture of Edith in some terrible predicament while he was enjoying himself at work. One time she would be lying in the basement with a broken leg for days while he went on a trip all over the country. Another time she would be trapped in a closet with the door stuck.

Along towards morning I thought up a really good one. It had him sweating. Edith was in bed with a big cast on her leg, unable to move, and the house was burning down around her. He was outside trying to get in and the firemen were dragging him back while Edith's dying screams tortured him. He woke up from that one and was afraid to go back to sleep.

Instead, he went into the front room and wrote a letter. Then he tore it up and went into the kitchen to the phone and sent a telegram to Edith's sister for her to come right away.

I liked that.

THE SISTER Ada must have been packed and ready to start when she got the telegram, because she arrived the next afternoon. I don't know WHERE she came from. I never found out, and in these days of

travel by air she could have come a thousand miles from any direction.

Anyway, she got here. It was six o'clock and Fred was fixing himself something to eat; a can of beans, a can of soup, some coffee, a couple of slices of bread, with a cupcake for desert,—the regular batchelor dinner of a married man when his wife's away, unless he has a yen to be a cook lurking somewhere in his subconscious.

There's a weak spot in the hot water pipe just under the sink that I was getting ready to let go, just to annoy Fred and make him miss his dinner before going to see Edith that evening, when the front doorbell rang. It was Ada. She had come out in a taxi. I saved the weak spot in the hot water pipe for some time.

I settled into Fred's subconscious and took a good look at Ada. She was worth looking at. Blond like her sister, but a couple of years younger, —around twenty. A little better looking, which is splitting hairs because

I classified her five minutes after she arrived. Predatory where Fred was concerned. A match for me. I could see right away I was going to have a pretty good time before many days went by. I could see that by the way Ada's eyes lit up when Fred told her Edith was still at the hospital and couldn't come home until the next day.

Edith was well over the line where beauty begins. But where Edith's curves were nice to look at, Ada's were fascinating. Even Fred knew that.

Unfortunately, women have minds as well as bodies. They have tongues that are linked to both, and that was where Edith had it over her sister Ada. She was *nice* enough. Fred liked her. In fact he more than liked her. He was drawn by her physical charms and repelled by her mental lack of charm compared to her sister.

Well, Ada put on the capable female act, taking over the job of fixing Fred a decent dinner, using one of Edith's aprons to good effect. It was worth a chuckle to see how Fred tried to down the thought that rose to his mind how much nicer Ada filled out the apron than Edith had. And with Edith in the hospital suffering with a broken leg! What a heel! But sometimes a man can't control his eyes or his thoughts any more than I can control them. All he can do is steer them.

ADA AND Fred left a little after seven for the hospital to see Edith. Fred was worrying a little. He knew that Edith wouldn't like having Ada alone in the house with him all night. However, he was afraid to suggest to Ada that she'd better stay home and tell Edith the next day that she'd just arrived.

And he didn't know that Ada had nearly broken her neck to get there the same day in the hope that Edith **WOULDN'T** be able to be home right away.

They forgot to put the cat out before they left, so I amused myself while they were gone by having the cat prow around the basement looking for mice.

The poor little mama mouse was frantic with fear that he might find her nest with all her babies in it. I purposely made him lie down and go to sleep after awhile not three feet from where the nest was hidden in an old apple box. Every time he twitched his whiskers the mama mouse had a fit! Mother love is sure something. There that mama mouse sat, guarding her offspring with her life. I honestly think she would have let the mangy old cat catch her to save her young, but I wouldn't think of doing that. After all, when the people were gone all I'd have to

amuse me would be the cat and the mice, and the mangy old cat wouldn't be able to get inside then, either.

FRED AND Ada got back about eleven. They'd stopped someplace and had a decent meal and a few drinks of beer.

It's moments like that I live for. One thing I have to say for Ada;—she knew what she was doing.

Fred showed her to her bedroom and carried her bags upstairs for her. Then he went to the front room and settled down in an easy chair and started reading the evening paper.

Ada came downstairs and ran some water in the bathtub. Then she went into the front room and asked Fred where the towels were. Her bathrobe was draped a little carelessly. Not open. Nothing vulgar. But just so it looked like it might come open at every step she took.

Her blonde hair was combed out so that it hung about her shoulders. The neck of the bathrobe was partly open,—revealingly, but not too revealingly.

She had studied her appearance in front of the bathroom mirror before going into the living room and arranged her bathrobe very carefully.

There's no question about it. She was a very alluring sight, standing in the doorway from the hall, one leg showing up to the knee, her hair hanging around her shoulders in subtle undress, and a generous expanse of skin showing below her chin.

She lowered her eyes at Fred's startled gaze when she asked him for a towel. I thought for a minute he was going to tell her where one was. That's where he made his mistake. He decided to get her one.

Well, they were even there, because she knew where they were too. They were in the linen closet in the bathroom.

While he was reaching to get one

she loosened the knot on the rope that tied around the bathrobe a little more.

He reached down a towel and turned to hand it to her. She reached for it quite naturally and was quite properly embarrassed when her robe came open.

It was at that point I concluded she should have become a great actress instead of wasting her time on penny ante stuff.

She exclaimed in embarrassed alarm and reached to draw her robe about her. Then suddenly she turned quite pale and her hands paused in midair.

She closed her eyes and turned her face up. Her lips were partly open.

WELL,—it's not hard to guess what Fred might have done. His wife was in the hospital with a broken leg and he loved her very much even without the broken leg. Also he wasn't a cad or a wolf. Just the same he was human.

But Ada reckoned without *me*. She had done all that strictly on her own, so to speak, and it was so good I was beginning to feel a little outclassed. Of course it didn't compare in finesse with anything I could do. Fundamentally it was vulgar. It was done in such a way that Fred would have been convinced later that it was all his fault. Perhaps Ada could have made him wonder if he hadn't married Edith because he loved Edith's sister.

There would have been the driving wedge of a baby on the way, (whether there was or not), the outraged wife who would quite rightly leave her husband and get a divorce, and then Ada would have what she wanted,—Fred. It didn't happen that way though.

Ada stood there, her arms partly raised as if arrested in the movement

of her bathrobe about her, her face slightly lifted, her eyes closed, her lips partly open, her breath coming fast, her heart beating frantically; expecting each instant to feel Fred's strong arms crush her to him. She waited for his lips to bruise hers in passion, to feel his fevered breath against her cheek, his crushing embrace.

Perhaps ten full seconds went by and it didn't happen. She opened her eyes feeling the same wondering unbelief a person might feel if he leaped over the edge of a thousand foot cliff to his death and opened his eyes to find himself floating in the air in violation of the laws of gravity.

This feeling was succeeded by a symphony of varying emotions which is to me what a Beethoven is to a musician.

You see, Fred was standing there, the towel dangling in his hand, and a bored grin on his face. His eyes were laughing at her.

"Devastatingly corny," he said. Then he draped the towel over her shoulder and left the bathroom, a hearty, amused chuckle drifting back from his departing figure like a slap in the face.

Of course, Ada could not guess that it was not Fred, but *I* with whom she was dealing at that moment. The shock to Fred's equilibrium in that moment when he had turned from the linen closet to see her bathrobe fall open, her face lift, her eyes close, and her lips part in surrender, had been just enough to make it possible for me to take over completely.

When he got back to the front room and sat down to continue reading the evening paper he had a vague idea that he had closed his eyes and handed over the towel and then escaped from an embarrassing situation quite gracefully. In fact, he felt quite

pleased with himself.

NOT SO with Ada. Poor girl. Her pride had received a mortal blow. For a full five minutes she stood trembling, mentally killing Fred in the most horrible ways imaginable. I noted with considerable satisfaction that she had quite a superiority complex, and that this blow would not go unavenged.

Her mind was much like that of the mangy old tom cat in that it was simple and practical and tended to pick some objective and work toward that until it gained it. She would not be satisfied with a mediocre revenge. Not her.

And what she might lack in—finess, yours truly would be GLAD to supply.

Oh, but it was good to have the warmth of human emotion to bask in once again; to play upon it as a great musician plays an organ in a cathedral, to dwell upon the rich overtones and chords, lightly cascade across the melody and improvise my own variations to enliven the theme. And as a Rubinstein would tuck a violin of rare richness of tone more lovingly under his chin and caress its strings more fondly, so I settled more securely about the aura of Ada and soothed the pulsating throb of her heart with my gentlest mental touch, smoothing the folds of her ruffled temper into a shape more suited to my desires.

The strength of her rage and thwarted passion flowed into me and I grew strong,—stronger than I had been for a long time. I grew too greedy and drained more of her life force into my being than she could reasonably spare. It wasn't my fault, really. I didn't realize what I was doing until she swayed dizzily as she was getting into the tub. Then it was too late to do anything about it. She slipped and

fell, hitting her head against the tub faucets.

Then she slipped into the tub and pretty soon the water rose high enough in the tub to cover her head. I knew she was going to drown if I didn't do something, so I tried to get Fred to rush in and save her.

He wouldn't have any of it. I screamed into his brain that Ada was lying in the tub unconscious. Do you know what he answered? He thought I was just an evil part of his subconscious trying to whomp up an excuse for him to break into the bathroom.

He said to himself, "How would it look if I rushed in there while she was bathing and said, 'Oh, you're all right! I thought you were drowning.'?"

Finally I gave up trying and went back to Ada. There was no use WASTING her life energy when I could use it ALL, was there? I felt very sorry for her and very ashamed of myself right then; but the new energy in my system soon buoyed up my spirits.

IT WAS NEARLY an hour later before Fred began to worry about his presentiment, as he called it, and the substantiating fact that the water was still running. He knocked on the bathroom door and called, "Are you all right, Ada?"

He kept knocking and calling for a couple of minutes before he worked up nerve enough to open the door and peek in. Then he rushed in and turned the water off. After that he just stood there and looked at Ada's dead body lying under the water with one knee breaking the surface. He was sort of dazed.

Finally he went into the kitchen to the phone and called the doctor that had fixed his wife's leg. After he hung up he started back to the bathroom, then went out on the front

porch instead and sat on the steps smoking cigarets until the doctor came.

I tried my best to comfort him. He wouldn't listen to my voice, so finally I made the tom cat come around and rub against his legs and purr. That helped a little.

The doctor stopped his car out in front and came up the front walk with his short legs going almost at a run to keep up with him. Wordlessly Fred led him to the bathroom.

The doctor reached under the water and pulled the plug. Then he changed his mind and put it back in again, and went into the kitchen and called the police. After that he went back to the bathroom and just looked at Ada's body without touching it.

When the police came they looked at it too. They even took pictures of it.

After awhile another doctor came. They called him the coroner. He and the other doctor made everybody get out of the bathroom and stop looking at Ada's body. Then they drained the water out of the tub and turned her over where they could get a better look at the place where her head had hit the faucet.

They talked about it, but I couldn't get what they were saying. You see, I get what people say by what they think, and some people are impossible to read. They seem to have shells around them like I said at the start of my story. These two doctors were like that.

Right after the doctors went out of the bathroom the one called the coroner said something in a low voice to one of the policemen. I got that. They were taking Fred down and locking him up for his own protection. They were afraid from the way he looked that he might harm himself. The shock of having his wife break her leg, and then his sister-in-law drown

in the bathtub the next day was too much, they thought. He should have time to get used to it.

Well, that didn't bother me. I liked Fred, and with all the new life Ada had supplied me it was easy to hang onto Fred all the way down to the police station.

WHEN THEY locked him up he sat down on the edge of the cot in the cell and thought and thought and thought. I didn't like that, because I could see in what direction his thoughts were going. The trouble with him was that he was superstitious. He had a superstitious idea that trouble always comes in threes.

Finally he did what I feared he was going to do. He definitely made up his mind he would never set foot in the house again. He was going to call the real estate man the first thing in the morning and tell him to sell it over again.

I could see myself living alone once more with nothing but the cat killing birds and the mice raising baby mice in the basement. I could see Fred meant it.

Well, it took a lot of energy to hang onto Fred way down at police headquarters, and when I let go I wouldn't be able to contact him again. I would be all alone maybe for months.

I didn't really mean to do him any harm. It was just that I couldn't bring myself to cast off, and all the time I was draining life energy out of him. Along toward morning he got so weak and cold that it was impossible to hang on any longer.

It was sure lonely in the house all by myself. I dozed most of the time, leaving only fine threads of awareness connected with the mangy old tom cat and the mice in the basement. These would awaken me if anyone came, but no one did.

It wasn't until after dark that a

nervous flutter in the mind of the mama mouse aroused me from my sleep. She had heard footsteps on the front porch.

I prodded the cat and made him run around to the front of the house so that I could get a good look at the people before trying to make contact with them directly.

You see, I knew I had gone too far with Edith, Ada, and Fred. Through no fault of my own I was likely to get a bad reputation!

I peeked at them through the cat's eyes around the corner of the house. There were two men. One was the doctor that had fixed Edith's broken leg, and also come when Ada had died in the bathtub.

The other man was a stranger; a heavy man with an enormous stomach and short, pudgy fingers.

The doctor was unlocking the door. When they stepped into the house I "felt" of the new man. Then I received a surprise. Two surprises, in fact. The first one was that he was perfectly aware that I was "feeling" him. The second was that he seemed to know all about me and wanted to be friendly!

That was new to me. Everyone I had ever known had been so stupid that when I spoke to them they thought it was their own mind. But he was different. He KNEW.

I guess I was so glad to find someone to REALLY talk to that I forgot myself. I started to settle into his aura and make myself at home. Then I got my third surprise.

When I got so far into his aura I received a distinct shock that made me see stars. It threw me completely out of balance and I had a hard time getting it back. After I had recovered enough to speak to the man again I found out he had done it deliberately.

He wanted to be friends, but he knew his stuff and would stand for

no nonsense! That was a new experience for me and I didn't know whether I liked it or not at first.

WE TALKED with each other for perhaps an hour after that and got quite well acquainted. I told him all about how lonely I was, and that I had only the old mangy tom cat and the mice for my life contacts most of the time.

He seemed to know just what I needed. He was a doctor too. Dr. Schwick. He said, "What you need is some sort of mental outlet. You need a large appreciative audience. To get that you should write your story."

He said he knew someone who was good at what he called automatic writing. He would bring that fellow with his typewriter, and all I would have to do would be to think out the details of my story and they would translate themselves into words in his mind, and flow out through his fingers into the typewriter.

He left right after that, but he promised to come back the next night with this other fellow. After he left I could think of nothing else but my chance to write.

He was as good as his word, too. The next night he and the other doctor and a young man with a portable typewriter came.

I only hope my story makes people realize that I am worth knowing. I can just see the days to come when I am famous, with dozens of people coming to the house. Some of them will be so nice! I can take just a little of their life force and become very strong. Then I won't need to hurt anybody at all.

I never want to hurt anybody, but when people are afraid of me, and only two or three people come around in a year, I get just starved for human warmth and emotion. And things always seem to work against me,—

like Edith falling and breaking her leg.

THE TYPEWRITER stopped. So monotonous had become its rhythmic chatter that it seemed to continue after it had stopped in fact.

Dr. Schwick had slowly moved around to where he could watch the face of the woman. It had a strange, compelling fascination for him with its other-world beauty and eyes that were limpid pools of bottomless night, seeming to open into realms where vague forms danced a devil dance around distant fires in the mad rites of witchcraft long gone into the limbo of the past.

Slowly the white, slender fingers emerged from the skull of the seated man until they once more poised over him. Then the red lips of the woman parted to reveal her needle sharp teeth, and she bent slowly forward, her head turning slightly so that it could rest against his neck.

Dr. Schwick stepped close. A shock seemed to grip the vampire creature and she sprang away, her face turning to a mask of rage.

The doctor faced her, protecting the seated form of the young man while the misty form of its duplicate swirled back through the thread of white into the body once more.

Orville stirred and rubbed his eyes as if he had been asleep. Then Dr. Bowden dared to ask the question in his mind.

"Can you tell where it is from what she wrote?" he asked eagerly.

"I think I know now," Dr. Schwick said. "But perhaps we can make sure. Follow me, both of you, but keep behind me."

He advanced toward the vampire, who was now snarling and spitting like a cat, her features more than beautiful even in the paroxysms of insane rage.

Slowly the creature retreated as the doctor advanced. And as he advanced the other doctor and Orville followed at his back.

This strange advance led through a doorway into the kitchen and half way across the kitchen.

Suddenly the vampire figure vanished.

"Quickly!" Dr. Schwick shouted. His short legs carried him in agile leaps toward the door to the basement. As he bounded down the steps in the darkness his eyes darted around the basement. They saw a momentary flash of white over in one corner. Then it was gone.

"The lights!" Dr. Schwick shouted.

Dr. Bowden turned on his flashlight and found the light switch. The basement was flooded with a blinding glare that revealed every detail.

Grim faced, he walked to a pile of boards in a far corner and started pulling them away. The two men joined him and shortly the concrete floor began to appear.

Orville moved a board and there was a swift scampering of small things as they fled out of sight.

"The mice," Dr. Schwick said with a satisfied tone. "I was right. They had to be as close as possible to her grave so that she could hold contact through them during the daytime when her strength was at ebb tide."

"But this is solid concrete," Dr. Bowden objected.

"Yes," Dr. Schwick said regretfully. "We'll have to come back tomorrow with some workmen to break through. There's nothing more we can do tonight. Let's get out of here."

They turned to leave.

On the cellar steps the cat stood barring the way. Its back was arched and its hair on end. It snarled at them.

Dr. Schwick reached into his coat

and pulled out a small, caliber automatic and shot the cat. It fell back. Its eyes remained open, looking at the doctor mutely as he stood there with the gun in his hand.

It mewed faintly, and just before its eyes grew dull in death there seemed to appear a look of gratitude and thanks for its release.

"I TELL you it's utterly insane."

The police captain said it in a tired, monotonous way like he had said it so much that he no longer realized he was saying it.

"Look at that floor. Look at it!" he repeated. "That concrete is at least ten years old."

"Fourteen," Dr. Schwick corrected. "I looked it up at the building inspector's office the first thing this morning."

"All right! It's fourteen years old then," the captain said. "And it hasn't been touched in fourteen years. How by all that's holy can you know that there is a body under this spot?"

"You don't have to believe me," Dr. Schwick said tolerantly. "You'll find it when you break through and dig. I doubt if you'll have to dig far. It will be the body of a woman who is very beautiful, not over thirty years old, and in a perfect state of preservation. It won't be embalmed but it will be as fresh as the day it was lain there. The clothing will have rotted away, proving how long it has been there. Now dig and prove me a liar."

The police captain's lips moved as if he were trying to speak. He gave up the attempt and turned to order the two workmen to start breaking the concrete floor.

A large rectangle was drawn on the floor where Dr. Schwick had marked the area he wanted broken open.

A grinning newspaper photogra-

pher snapped a shot of the scene with one of the workmen with a large sledge hammer poised over his head as he prepared for the downward swing. The picture was taken at a perfect angle to get in the expression of frustrated rage and puzzlement on the captain's features and the unruffled calm of Dr. Schwick.

The first two blows rebounded with a hollow sound. The third cracked the concrete with a dead sound. After that it was quick work to spread the break over the whole area and lift off the broken pieces.

Before the area had been more than a third uncovered one of the workmen gave a gasp of excitement and redoubled his efforts.

The body lay just under where the concrete had been. It was obvious that a shallow grave had been dug,—just deep enough to hold the body; and the concrete had been poured over it.

It was covered with a shroud of mouldering black cloth which pulled away in pieces.

DR. SCHWICK stepped forward and tore away the covering over the head, revealing a face white and beautiful and so lifelike that he would not have been surprised if the nostrils had quivered and the body had started breathing.

Dr. Schwick turned to Dr. Bowden and the coroner.

"I would suggest you cremate this body before nightfall," he said with quiet earnestness.

Dr. Beasley, the coroner, bent over the body of the woman and tore off more of the rotten cloth.

His face was slightly grey. His hand reached reluctantly toward his black bag, hesitating as if he were trying to resist doing what he wanted to do.

With shaking hands he took out a hypodermic syringe and inserted it into a vein of the corpse and slowly pulled back on the plunger. An evilly red fluid crept up into the glass tube. The three doctors watched it hypnotically. They were oblivious of the flash bulbs shot off by the press photographer.

When the police captain saw the blood running into the syringe from a corpse that had to be at least fourteen years dead he turned a light shade of green and sat down on the floor.

"YOU MIGHT think everything startling had happened already in that story," Dr. Schwick said. He was talking to a small circle of friends many months later. "In the ordinary course of events you would think the coroner would take my advice and cremate the body at once. He did, actually. But he kept the sample of blood and took it to his laboratory for analysis.

"Also the police began tracking down the first owner of that house in order to solve the crime. There wasn't a mark on the body to show any sign of violence; but, as Dr. Bowden remarked, any wound could have healed up in that fourteen years. At least it was no more improbable than the obvious fact that the blood had not coagulated and the unembalmed body hadn't decomposed.

"They finally found the man. He had moved to another city but had not changed his name. They brought him back and accused him of murdering his wife, for that was who the woman was.

"The man told a curious story. He said his wife had been a student of the occult and had been getting potions of various sorts from a mail order occult school that were supposed to put her in a trance. She had

become so fascinated with the work that she barely remained conscious long enough each day to take care of bodily needs.

"He had not believed in all that, but had let her go her way because he didn't know what else he could do. He had remonstrated with her several times without any success. One day she did not wake up from her nightly, drug induced trance. He tried everything he could think of short of calling a doctor. Every attempt to waken her failed.

"After three days of that he became convinced she was dead. He had visions of a doctor disbelieving his story and him being accused of murder.

"At the time the basement of the house did not have a floor, but was just concrete walls with a dirt floor.

"He had no intimate friends, and aside from him his wife had no relatives in the world. It would be quite simple to dispose of the body and move away. No one would ever miss his wife and report it.

"He obtained the building permit to lay a concrete floor and did it himself, laying his wife's body in a shallow grave before pouring the concrete.

"When asked about the nature of the drug he did not have the slightest idea. He couldn't remember the name of the company his wife had bought it from, nor where they were located. The police were at a dead end. They could hardly convict the man of murder under the circumstances. They dropped the case and scratched it off the books.

"Not so the coroner. He had that sample of blood and had been doing things with it. It seems he was one of the most outstanding technicians in the country in spite of his position as a coroner.

"In two months he subjected that

sample to the most advanced analysis possible in this day and age. He found out several things. They cast a great deal of light into the ancient mystery of vampirism, although they raise a greater one about where the mail order company that sold the drug to the woman had obtained it.

"DR. BEASLEY took half his blood sample and made plasma out of it. He injected a drop of this plasma into each of six white rats. Nothing happened for ten days, then all six of the rats lost consciousness. All signs of respiration stopped completely. The heart stopped beating. Yet day after day those six rats remained unchanged. Their blood remained fluid. Their body temperatures dropped down until they were fluctuating with the change of room temperature, yet the blood in those rats remained fluid, gradually thickening and growing darker as body liquid evaporated.

"After another ten days had passed one of the rats began to undergo another change. His gradually dwindling body expanded to normal overnight. The body fluid had increased to normal unexplainably. This continued. The other five rats soon dried out, yet this one rat did not.

"With the idea of vampirism uppermost in the doctor's mind he watched the living rats closely and soon could detect signs of weakening vitality among them.

"He tried an experiment. He took the supposedly vampire rat into another part of the building and put a young and healthy rat in a cage near it. The next morning the young rat was seemingly dead.

"The scientific mind of the corner, now completely absorbed by the problem, overlooked no possible clues. He did not destroy the body of the rat victim, but put it with the

others that had apparently died. It too became a successful vampire.

"The astral mechanism of vampirism did not concern the doctor. He believed he had something material in this that he could deal with, and he intended going no farther than laboratory technique could carry him. The supernatural aspects could wait.

"He took more of the plasma, and plasma made from the infected, dead rats. He filtered this fluid to remove all bacteria and injected the fluid in a fresh batch of rats. Some of them became vampires and all of them lost consciousness permanently.

"At last he could definitely prove that vampirism is caused by a filterable virus. This explained the fact that vampires can turn their victims into vampires, by infecting them with this virus while sucking their blood.

"He subjected the fluid containing the virus to all kinds of tests to determine its stability, the possibility of analysing its chemical structure, etcetera. Finally he turned to the hystology and studied the effects on the rats themselves.

"I dropped in to see him almost every day and so did Dr. Bowden. We three were more or less working together on it, although Dr. Beasley did all the work.

"After a month of dissection and tissue analysis we arrived at a startling conclusion. The virus gave the blood cells remarkably increased vitality and made them so they could thrive and multiply and move about. They ceased their subservient role in the body, no longer supplying the tissue with oxygen and carrying away poisons. The waste products of metabolism of these changed cells deposited on the walls of tissue cells and sealed them completely so that the structure of the body did not deteriorate. Strangely, the nerve tissue and the brain did not lose out, but

seemed to remain alive and functioning. In some way the metabolism of the nervous system seemed to become a part of the new organism. It seemed certain that in a human vampire *the brain could remain conscious and alive while the body was intact.*

NOW I HAD my clue to the supernatural aspects of vampirism, if not to the astral mechanism of the thing. While the brain lived and remained conscious, it could go on developing. It would be, in effect, in the trance state permanently, so that the soul could go and come at will.

"The material or scientific explanation of the transfer of blood from the living to the inanimate material form of the vampire is probably beyond the ability of present science to fathom. Yet, in psychic phenomena we have teleportation as a well authenticated phenomena. The spirit of the vampire, freed of its mortal distractions and faced with the necessity of supplying the nourishment for its physical form with the instruments of the spirit alone, undoubtedly solves that problem and carries on the practice of draining the life blood from living mortals.

"Naturally, since all tissue in the body of the vampire becomes inactive and sealed against decay by the preservative waste products of the blood cells infected with the virus, food that has to be digested is out of the question. Also by the same token, it probably takes very little actual nourishment to keep the vampire going. A pint of blood now and then to supply added vitality to the blood stream which now circulates by the active movement of the individual cells rather than by the pumping of the heart, and perhaps a little moisture unless the body is placed where evaporation cannot take place.

"Finally the study was completed short of actual experiment on people which we naturally could not bring ourselves to do.

"We dared not publish our results. Yet we felt that the knowledge we had gained might someday prove invaluable to the human race. So we made three vials of the virus fluid and sealed them safely. Also we made three copies of the report on the experiments on parchment bond paper and placed a copy with each of the vials. One we sent to the Vatican. The second we sent to the President, and the third we sent to the American Medical Association.

"Perhaps we did wrong. If one of those vials and reports got into the wrong hands,—the hands of one who desired immortality in the flesh at any price; it could very well mean the return of the vampirism that flourished in the dark ages. That would be an awful thing, and our materialistic civilization would be an easy prey for vampirism since it has come by modern tradition to consider all such things impossible and the product of deranged minds."

Dr. Schwick shook his head dolefully.

"Yes," he said. "The more I think of it the more I believe we should have destroyed every trace of those experiments and kept the thing quiet."

He sighed and reached down beside his chair for the apple cider jug and refilled his glass.

Ten white faces watched him silently. He looked at those faces and was reassured as to the safety of the secret he had just told them. **NONE OF THEM BELIEVED HIM.** And in **his** heart he hoped that those vials and accompanying reports had been destroyed by their recipients because *they* refused to believe too. But he wasn't sure.

OMEGA

By
GUY ARCHETTE

Death had been decreed for all beings on the Earth. Thus the Varu came to carry out the orders. But man refused to die . . .

COMMANDER Thal Odan of the Varu Extermination fleet gestured something of weariness at the faces that peered out at him from the facets of the communi-grid. "You all know what to do. We've done this so many times before. . . . Only this need I say—let none of the Earthlings escape."

The heads framed in the facets nodded. There was a flurry of arms raised in salute. Then the images moved out of focus, and Thal Odan flicked off the communi-grid.

Thal Odan drew a deep breath. He stared into a far distance, and whatever he saw there brought a burn of mingled relief, pain, and triumph into his deep-set, yellow eyes. There was not a little pain.

Let none escape. . .

Thal Odan shook his head slowly. It was not to his liking—but he had his orders. He was a soldier who had been trained, and well, to obey orders.

Turning to the inter-ship communicator, Thal Odan signalled the



control room.

"Bring the ship over the scene of operations, and hold it there."

"Aye, sir," the voice of the flight officer answered.

The hum of the propulsion engines deepened, held, then faded. Thal Odan moved to a viewport and looked out. His vessel was hovering

motionless high above the others. As commander of the extermination fleet, Thal Odan was not participating in what was taking place down there. He was rather thankful for this.

Thal Odan looked down. He didn't actually want to look, but his eyes were drawn down by a curious fasci-



The great ship loosed terrible rays of destructive force, and the village was annihilated . . .

nation. This was a momentous occasion, and was not to be missed, for its like would never be seen again.

The ships of the Varu, looking strangely like spheres cut through the center by a disc, were swooping and darting about something down there on the ground. It was almost unrecognizable now, but Thal Odan knew that but moments ago it had been a village of Earthlings, a cleverly camouflaged collection of small, wooden huts. The terrible K7 annihilation beams of the fleet were blasting the village and its occupants to atoms.

The last remnant of the race which had once populated the planet Earth so thickly was being exterminated.

It was this knowledge that held Thal Odan's eyes intent and awed on the scene below. The last of a mighty race being wiped from the face of the planet that had spawned them.... A last handful being sent to join the millions and millions that had already gone to that far-off land of the dead.

One pitiful village—an easy target for the annihilation beams of the Varu. And the work of the beams was almost done. On all the planet there were no other villages, for these and the mighty cities which had preceded them had already met the fate of the village below. The last trace of the being called Man and his handiwork—obliterated.

Earth, now, for the Varu. Earth, with its green fields, tossing seas, and its bright-blue sky strewn with clouds.

Thal Odan looked away. The work of the beams was done.

IN THE bright-blue sky that was theirs now, the Varu ships cruised slowly, searching. Their beams probed the shadows in the forest be-

low, raked the fields that spread away on either side, and rooted among the tumbled rocks and boulders that littered the slopes of the hills that had stopped the advance of the forest. Then, one by one, they settled to the surface they had ravaged.

Again Thal Odan signalled the control room, this time giving the order to land. He sighed. No, none had escaped....

It was over. His job was done.

The Council would be pleased. They would probably hold a special session and decorate him for his service. There would be long-winded speeches by each of the Superiors in turn—all the trimmings. And when it was all over, they would forget him and what he had done in the work that lay ahead.

But Thal Odan knew he would not forget. In the long nights of the years ahead he would always remember. For he was a soldier, and toward the end this had not been war but murder on a cosmic scale. With their vast cities destroyed, their armies wiped out, all traces of organization gone, the Earthlings had been a conquered people. But the Council had not been satisfied. They had wanted complete extermination of this race whose planet they had chosen for their new home. And Thal Odan had had to obey orders. But it was not the kind of battle a soldier likes to fight.

Only the Council would be pleased, and all the others who had hated and feared the Earthlings as deeply as the Council had. Thal Odan had feared the Earthlings, too, but he had respected them. He knew the basis of the fear and hate which the Varu had for Earthlings—a disturbing sense of physical inferiority. For the Varu were pygmies in comparison to

the race they had conquered and destroyed. Little more than four feet tall and slender in proportion, they had appeared insignificant beside Earthlings. They had resented this intensely and bitterly, and had used every trick of their highly advanced science to remove a standard of physique that humbled them.

But this was not the only reason. The Earthlings were highly intelligent, too. Experience had taught Thal Odan the unbelievable extent of their cunning and resourcefulness. Keen and clever—and very, very deadly fighters. No—no Varu would ever have been able to pass the night hours in comfort while Earthlings still lived. Thal Odan often wondered what the outcome would have been had the Varu arrived fifty or a hundred years later. He thought he knew—and shuddered with the knowledge.

For it was only after ten years of terrible, terrible fighting that the last camouflaged village of Earthlings had fallen. Oh, the Varu had suffered!

But it was all over now. This planet was the home of the Varu.

There was a slight thump as the ship landed. Thal Odan shook himself slightly and made his way to an exit hatch. He stepped out to the ground, wrinkling his nose flaps against the acrid odor of burning vegetation. His captains joined him, saluting as they approached.

"It is done?" Thal Odan asked quietly.

Sard Mil elected to reply for the group.

"Not quite yet, Commander. We have men scouring the district to mop up any possible survivors. But none have been found as yet, and it seems certain that none of the Monsters escaped our surprise air at-

track. Is was too carefully planned."

THAL ODAN nodded. His tiny mouth tightened the faintest bit. He had never liked to hear the Earthlings called monsters. No good soldier thus depreciates an enemy he respects. And it was almost as if the Varu admitted their feeling of inferiority, by using the epithet to compensate for it. Ten years, he decided, can do a lot to distort the standards of a race.

Feeling strangely irritated, Thal Odan turned back to his ship. He stopped.

A cry was vibrating on the air. Winged toward the group about Thal Odan's vessel came a soldier. Some kind of excitement had made him use his degravity floats far above the minimum safety limit.

The soldier skidded to a stop, waving his arms to hold his balance. His eyes were distended with the emotion that had been in his shout.

"We found one of them, sir—one of the Monsters!" the soldier gasped, saluting Thal Odan hurriedly.

"What!"

Thal Odan's eyes narrowed swiftly against the undue loudness of his voice. He felt slightly ashamed. But at that moment the thought had rushed into his mind that he could see what was undoubtedly the last of the Earthlings before—

"Has it been harmed?" he demanded quickly.

"No, sir. It's a small one. A child."

"Lead us there." Thal Odan touched a button on the strap that held his degravity floats, lifted into the air, and soared with a speed that quickened the feel of the gentle breeze on his face. His mind was working rapidly.

The gleaming hulls of the ships dropped from sight behind the rise of the hills. Then the leading figure

ahead began descending. Thal Odan cut his power slowly to lessen the impact of his contact with the ground; for he was old. He stumbled, regained his feet and balance, and looked around.

The soldier was pointing. Thal Odan's pulse quickened.

A short distance away was a curious little shelter, built of a half-ring of stone and covered with branches and leaves. In the shadows something moved.

The captains had drawn their hand blasters and were watching that shelter with a taut wariness, their nose flaps opening and closing rapidly. Thal Odan drew no weapon. He stepped forward eagerly, peered into the shadows made by the crude roof.

Within, as the soldier had said, was a Monster, but to Thal Odan, an Earthling—the last of its kind. It was small, very young. That was apparent. It made bubbly throat sounds, and waved arms that were clumsily thick according to Varu standards. Bright eyes, filled with laughter and innocence, met Thal Odan's.

Thus it was that the Varu came upon Omega.

ONE OF THE captains turned to the soldier who had made the discovery.

"Why didn't you shoot the thing when you first found it?"

The soldier shifted uncomfortably beneath the other's stern gaze.

"This—this was so strange, sir. The child and the shelter so far from the village.... There was something about it I couldn't understand. Since it was only a child and the only Monster we had found, I thought that it would be best to seek the advice of my superiors before I took any action of my own."

"I think I understand," Thal Odan

said softly, marking the face of the man indelibly in his mind. Here, he realized, was another who thought as he did. "What you did was quite right."

Sard Mil, the aggressive, self-elected spokesman for the group, stepped forward. His face was hard.

"Our advice is this—kill the Monster and have done with it!"

The others growled assent, their eyes fixed distastefully upon the shelter. As though taking his initiative from the others, Sard Mil stepped toward it, his hand blaster raising.

"Stop!" Thal Odan's voice was like the snap of a whip and his eyes were yellow slits of fury. "You have not consulted me, Sard Mil. One of these days you will go too far with your impetuosity." Then his tones softened. "This is the last Earthling on all the planet—the last relic of a race. This is the final spark of a people. Are your minds too shallow to understand and appreciate this?" He was speaking to all of them. "The final spark of a race.... It is too momentous a thing for us to take it upon ourselves to extinguish it. We shall take the child before the Council."

"We shall be wasting time," Sard Mil muttered sullenly. "The Council will not hesitate to decree the Monster's death."

"Perhaps," Thal Odan breathed, though he knew the other was right. But—the final spark. Thal Odan did not want the extinguishing of it on his hands.

"Make a sling," he ordered. "Carry the child to the ships." He watched in silence while a crude support was made of the branches which covered the tiny shelter. There was grim amusement in his eyes as he saw that it took two Varu to lift the little

Earthling, and that they did it as gingerly and as warily as though they lifted high explosive.

They were ready. Thal Odan touched the activator of his degravity floats and lifted into the air. His lips were curved into a small smile of satisfaction as he soared back to his ship.

Perhaps—perhaps, now, in the twilight years before him, he would find a little rest.

THE GREAT Council Hall of the Varu was filled with a strange noise. The last Earthling was hungry, and was announcing this fact with a loud voice and lusty lungs.

The Superiors of the Council were extremely annoyed. Their eyes kept moving in irritation from Thal Odan to the small figure surrounded by a dozen Council guards. Thal Odan was explaining the discovery and the presence alive of the last Earthling. The representatives of the various people's groups were straining forward in their seats to catch the fleet commander's concluding words.

Thal Odan was breathless from the effort required to make himself heard above the clamor of the last Earthling. But his face was impassive.

"...And so I deemed it wise to bring the child before the Council and let them make the decision. As the last member of its race, I felt that the decision of its death was too momentous for me to make alone."

The spokesman for the Superiors rose.

"Commander Thal Odan, whatever you may have said, this is but another evidence of your undue squeamishness with regard to the extermination of those monsters called Earthlings. We well recall that it was you who advocated the keeping of the last tribe of Earthlings on a res-

ervation instead of completely exterminating them. At the last session of the Council, complete extermination of this last tribe to be discovered was voted upon, and your orders for the expedition against them were to that effect. In bringing this Earthling here, you have acted contrary to the wishes of the Council."

Thal Odan's lips were closed tightly against the anger that raged within him. He was a soldier—and a soldier fights only until the battle is won. Extermination is for savages and cowards.

"However," the spokesman continued, "we, the Superiors of the Council, recognize the climactic nature of the decision, and your shortcoming is alleviated somewhat because of this. In view of your age, rank, and service, no action will be taken against you. You are dismissed."

Thal Odan smiled bitterly, bowed, and left rostrum and the Council Hall. He was in disgrace, of course. There would be no speeches in his honor now, no decorations. But he would not miss them. The only comfort in his twilight years was that he had been spared the making of a blow which would have spelled finis to a race.

Back in the Council Hall, the spokesman for the Superiors was asking, "What is the disposition of the Representatives?"

The spokesman for the various groups stepped forward. Their voices rose in unison.

"Death!"

And then there was an amazed silence. For one group had not rendered a decision.

The representatives of the Scientists had risen to their feet—an action of protest. Their spokesman moved quickly to the rostrum.

"Superiors and Representatives of the Council, we, the representatives of of the Scientists, do protest committing this last member of the Earthling race to death."

The spokesman for the Superiors was staring.

"On what grounds?"

THE SPOKESMAN for the Scientists was an elderly Varu, wise in the tactics of the Council Hall. He turned to the representatives of the various people's groups, spreading his hands in appeal. For he knew that it was through these that the decisions of the Superiors were influenced. His voice was low and persuasive.

"Men of the Varu, you cannot question the fact that you owe much to us scientists. Through our researches, through our experiments, we bring you things to make your lives comfortable and content. With our serums and healing rays, we save your loved ones from dread diseases. With our inventions and discoveries, we lessen your toil and increase you knowledge of Nature, making you her masters. When our home planet was confronted with collision with a wandering star, it was we who made possible interstellar travel and saved the race from doom. And it was we who made possible the weapons which enabled you to take this world for your new home.

"Forever on we scientists go, working tirelessly for the good of the race. Little do we ever ask in return.

"This Earthling here is the last of its kind—and all the more valuable because it is alive. Heretofore, we have had only dead and maimed Earthlings for our studies. They were worthless for certain details we wished to know. This Earthling, when it has grown sufficiently, could supply the precious data we lack.

"Any discoveries we make would be for the further good of the race. This is our first thought, our first desire. Seldom are we scientists rewarded, and seldom do we ask to be. All we ask now is that you allow this Earthling to live so that we may study it. It is very young and can cause no harm. Every precaution on our part will be taken to see that it does not become a cause for worry.

"Let us have this last Earthling to study. Dead, it can never be of any good. Alive, it will be of inestimable value.

"I, the spokesman for the Scientists, humbly await your verdict."

He stepped from the rostrum and joined his fellows, who glanced at him approvingly. The groups drew within each other for discussion of the case. The great council hall echoed to the tumult of arguing voices.

On the floor, surrounded by tiring guards, the last Earthling tossed in restless slumber.

When the sun had begun to edge from view beyond the western horizon, and its dimming rays made a rosy glory of the colored windows of the council hall, the Representatives tendered to their spokesmen their final decisions. These gathered into two opposing groups of Fors and Againsts.

The Representatives of the Scientists smiled in quiet triumph. There was a majority of Fors.

The last Earthling was theirs for study.

But, as usual, the Superiors of the Council had the last word in the matter. Their spokesman arose, frowning.

"We, the Superiors of the Council, do not wholly approve of the verdict which has just been reached. But since a majority vote has granted

life to the last of the Monsters, we will let it stand as is—with, however, this amendment:

"The last of the Monsters shall be in the care of the Scientists until he has reached manhood. Up to that time, they are to be responsible for him and his actions. When he has reached manhood, he shall be put to death and his body preserved in the Museum of the Conquest for the view of future generations as the last specimen of his race.

"The Council is adjourned."

IT WAS TO Jennak Pon, the Coordinator of the Scientists, that much of the responsibility for the last Earthling fell; for he was the head of his group, and as such was answerable for many of their faults. But, excited as is any true scientist before whom has opened up a whole vista of new and fascinating problems, he gave little or no thought to worry. After all, a child is a child, no matter to what race it belongs. And nothing that can be foreseen is to be feared from a child.

Jennak Pon was a brilliant and capable Varu, else he would never have attained the leadership of his group. Through his duties were seemingly endless, he kept his men functioning with the smoothness and regularity of a precision machine. He knew well how to rekindle hope and determination from the ashes of discouragement and despair. He was just past middle age, and his body had a rounded plumpness which, according to Varu physical standards, was called fat.

It was with great enthusiasm that Jennak Pon plunged into the task of beginning the series of studies which were to revolve about the last Earthling. An entire wing of the Central Laboratory was set aside and fitted up for the accommodations and

care of the child. And, through trial and error experiments, he and his men learned to feed it. The first crude successes were refined and at last a diet was reached which was of eminent satisfaction in its results.

Gazing down at the last Earthling one day, Jennak Pon settled the next of the problems.

"You need a name," he told the child. "Henceforth, you shall be called Omega. It is a highly appropriate name, for not only is it in one of your own languages, but it also means 'the last'. And the last you are—the last of your kind."

Lying upon the soft materials of his enclosure, Omega gurgled and waved his limbs. His eyes were bright, as though with acknowledgement.

THE EARTH revolved about the Sun as it had done in the aeons of yore. And the years passed, and Omega grew.

His growing was a swift and robust thing. At the age of eight he was as tall as the Varu and as broad as the plump Jennak Pon himself. He was a handsome child, with crisp, chestnut hair and serious, level gray eyes. He smiled little, and his speech was slow and grave.

He was older than his years, astonishingly mature in thought and action. For he had never known play in the juvenile activity sense of the word, had never known laughter with companions of his own age or kind. His world was a solemn and uneventful one, completely lacking in those things which make up the normal world of a child. His was a world bounded by severe, glistening laboratories and staid Varu scientists.

Occasionally, however, and in connection with his studies, Jennak Pon would take him on air-ship flights far from the laboratories and the

city. There, in that outside world where there were forests and mountains and plains, they would delve into geological formations and gather mineral, plant, and animal specimens. Omega took a keen delight in these trips. He loved the vastness and quiet of the wilderness, revelled in the sun and wind. Jennak Pon enjoyed them, too. For they were something in the nature of vacation trips for him.

And, sometimes, there would be visits to the city. Omega had liked them at first, but now they were something that he avoided. With the growth in his mentality, the visits to the city only served to deepen the sense of his own strangeness. For he was already aware that he was radically different from the people with whom he was daily thrown in contact.

He could not explain this difference. Even others felt it. On his visits to the city, rare now, people would stare at him and point at him and draw into groups and discuss him in lowered voices. And the children, so queer and so much smaller than himself, would follow him and shrill in their thin voices, "The Monster! The Monster!"

It all hurt, hurt so very badly. Especially the taunts of the children. At those times a red mist would film his vision, and only Jennak Pon's restraining hand on his arm prevented him from tearing into the midst of the tiny demons and smashing them to silence.

He had already guessed that his differentness had something to do with his confinement to the laboratories. He knew what the laboratories were and the purposes they served, and he knew that they were not the kind of homes that other people had. And there were the tests which

groups of scientists periodically made upon him. He had enjoyed the tests at first, looking upon them as something in the nature of games. It had been great fun to hurriedly fit little blocks together into geometric figures before a light flashed, and guess the numbers on cards. There were many other kinds of tests, and there were some that he did not like. But all had now assumed a deep significance, and his liking for them had gone. It was through force of habit that he went through all the motions.

LONELINESS was heavy upon him. He had no companions with whom he could talk or play. The Varu children feared him as deeply as he disliked them. And at times his desire for friends like himself became so strong that it reached actual physical discomfort. Jennak Pon was a companion of sorts. That is, when he wasn't so very busy.

Often Omega wondered why he never saw others like himself. Why was he so unique? Were there others like him in the world? He asked Jennak Pon once, but the answer he received had been curiously evasive.

There was evasion everywhere where he was concerned. He felt as if something were constantly being hidden from him. And this served to increase the depth of his loneliness.

One of the few comforts in his otherwise barren existence was his studies. In these he absorbed himself with an intensity which was a subconscious effort to compensate for his lack of playmates. His penetration into many fields of knowledge had reached an amazing degree; for there was in his heredity that rare thing called genius. Able to read and understand at four, he had, by this time, the ability to criticize any one of the abstruse scientific treatises in

the laboratory libraries.

His main interest was the physical sciences, particularly those of chemistry, physics, and mathematics. There was little in Varu history to interest him—at least that much of their history which he was allowed to read. And Varu literary works simply did not find a responsive chord within him.

His mind, with its growing brilliance, had turned to the physical sciences. In these there were worlds within worlds, knowledge without end. Out of these things could be built, fascinating things, like the bright and glittering things which the Varu scientists built in their laboratories.

Omega studied intensely and fiercely, his mind absorbing like a sponge that great amount of scientific knowledge which the Varu had amassed. And something like an instinctive cunning made him conceal his growing intelligence from the Varu—even from the hurried and kindly Jennak Pon, his only friend.

For a formless something was growing within him—something that was keeping insidious pace with his growth in years and knowledge. Indefinite and vague, as yet, there were times when it almost bordered on actual realization. At those times he would look up sharply from whatever he was doing, and stare into space, as though in answer to a tiny voice that was calling from somewhere far, far down within him. And chill winds would prick his skin, as though he were remembering...

AT SIXTEEN that something which had been growing within him through the years finally took shape. It coalesced, hardened, into a terrible, all-consuming hate for the Varu.

Omega never tried to view this

hate objectively and analyze it, for it had always been there. It was natural. It had been fused into his being, grown with him, until it had become a part of him no more to be explained than the nose on his face.

Other things came with the hate, strange, nebulous knowledge. In the night hours, when he lay sleepless, gazing into the darkness and thinking, thinking, memories would swirl dimly to his mind. Words in another tongue, caressing, faces that smiled down at him—

And something else.

Something that was not a child memory pulled to the surface by his powerful mind. Something that was very real and very urgent.

He had a mission here, a duty to fulfill. He had a task to do, and everything else was to be subordinated to the doing of it.

He had to destroy the Varu—exterminate them as utterly and as ruthlessly as they had earlier exterminated his people.

And in the night hours, when he lay sleepless, staring into the darkness and thinking, thinking, he would wonder how he knew that he had ever had any people other than the Varu among whom he had lived and grown. How had he ever known that the Varu had destroyed these people of his?

He couldn't explain. The knowledge was there, and with it the task of retaliation.

The desire for information about his people was a poignant desire in his heart and mind. He felt that he could never rest until he knew all that there was to know about them. He sought for sources of information. And, bit by bit, he learned.

Omega had kept his intelligence carefully hidden through the years. Never had he said or done anything

which might have given the Varu cause for worry or fear. They tolerated him with a familiar contempt, and allowed him a quite free run of the laboratories. For, with nothing to keep them glowing, thoughts of danger die with the passing of time.

Thus it was that he had been able to leave his room night after night, and, stealing to the libraries, peruse there by stealth certain records and documents that he would not have otherwise been permitted to read. The records were kept in separate, locked rooms, but his clever hands, aided by slender instruments stolen from the laboratories, gained him entrance. It was a slow and dangerous business, but with his mind to fill out the gaps, it wasn't long until he had a complete picture of his people and what had happened to them.

And his hate was all the more cold and deadly for the knowledge.

TALL AND strong, his people had been, and though they had their faults, brave withal and aspiring. They had covered all of the inhabitable earth, and had been of many different kinds—white men, black men, yellow men and red. They had all lived together in a highly integrated society. Their cities had reared taller and broader even than that at the Varu were building now, and they had had vessels which traveled through the air, on and beneath the water, and on the land. Their science had progressed to the point where they had been making the first feeble attempts to reach the planets.

Then the Varu had come. From out of space the Varu had come, in their great interstellar arks. Weary and heart-sick from long, long years of searching for an inhabitable planet. Into the solar system they had come—and seen the planet which the beings who peopled it called Earth.

Earth had met the every qualification of the Varu. They had wanted it for their new home, and the fact that it was already peopled did not deter them from taking it, for they were tired of seeking and cautious investigations had assured them that the science of this other race was inferior to their own. Thus, confident and greedy, they had waged a war of conquest, striking suddenly from out of the blue sky upon their unsuspecting victims.

But it had not been as easy as they expected. The war of conquest had dragged out for ten, long years, and the Earthlings had fought to the last. They had fought with a cunning, courage, and tenacity which appalled the Varu. And when the war of conquest was technically finished, the fear of the Varu had become so vast and intense that they could let no Earthlings live to insure their peace of mind. Extermination—with a mercilessness and vindictiveness born of their cringing, craven souls and their flayed egos.

In Omega's mind was the conviction that his people had been the real victors. They may have lost in a war of sciences—but they had emerged triumphant in one of courage.

Now he knew all that he needed to know. The next step was vengeance. That inexplicable command which was urging him on to wipe out the Varu had an answering desire in his own mind.

Omega began to plan. He took a certain scientific principle as his foundation and upon it built a framework of mathematics. The rest of the deadly structure had to be completed through experiments and research. He plunged into the work feverishly, though with an outward casualness meant to allay any suspicions or curiosity which might

arise among the Varu scientists.

WHEN OMEGA reached twenty, the weapon was almost completed. Several small parts, adjustments, a final test, and it would be ready to do the duty for which it had been built.

Four years filled with deadly danger lay behind him—a danger that would never cease until the last Varu was gone. Always, while he worked, he had had to keep part of his mind alert for any changes in attitude of those around him. It had been a terrific nervous and mental strain. And besides, there had been disappointments, heart-breaking failures.

The Varu had wondered, of course. And they had asked questions. Omega had explained that the thing he was building was a device to control the weather through atmospheric vibrations. He had gone on building his weapon beneath the noses of the Varu, laughing at them just as they laughed at him.

For the Varu did not know the incredible extent of Omega's intelligence. He had kept it carefully hidden behind a semblance of quiet dullness, and had never once betrayed himself. He had succeeded so well that he and his device were the butt of many jokes about the laboratories.

Omega found a grim humor in this. He had no sympathy in him. Only enemies surrounded him, and their petty pointed barbs were dulled against the armor of his hate. The few friends he had had were gone now with the tide of years. The last to go was the genial and busy Jen-nak Pon. An accident in one of the laboratories had taken him.

So Omega worked on, putting the finishing touches to his weapon and looking forward to the day that would see the end of the Varu. He was so absorbed that he almost for-

got to keep his constant check upon them. It was one bright afternoon that he looked up suddenly from his work to realize that something was wrong.

The jokes, the teasing jests, had ceased. The manner of the scientists toward him had become sober, solemn.

Every sense flaring instantly with alarm, he ceased work. What had happened?

Tense, his thoughts kaleidoscoping, he investigated. With hidden microphones, he eavesdropped upon the conversation of the scientists. He learned what was the cause of the change toward him.

He had reached manhood. According to an old Council decree, he was soon to be put to death and his body placed in the Museum of the Conquest as a specimen.

His blood throbbing with emergency, Omega began preparations to flee the laboratories and the city of the Varu. He carefully disassembled his weapon and packed it for carrying. Then he gathered together the tools, materials, and equipment he would need. To this he added food and blankets.

With the fall and deepening of night, he left his room, carrying the weapon, and crept to the roof of the laboratories. The roof served as a landing field for the small air-ships of the scientists, and since many of them stayed late at the laboratories to continue engrossing experiments, there always were several ships to be found there.

Omega selected one, and deposited his burden within it. Then he returned to gather the rest of his things.

AS HE WAS returning to the roof with the last of his bundles, the door of one of the rooms along the

hall opened, and a Varu came out. He stared at Omega, then at the bundle. His eyes widened and his mouth opened to release a shout of alarm. But, moving with desperate speed, Omega dropped his parcel and leaped upon the Varu. His powerful hands closed about the slender neck. There was a dull snap, loud in the night quiet of the laboratories. The Varu went limp, his intended warning dying with him.

Omega crouched tensely there in the hall, listening to find whether the short and deadly scuffle had been heard. Finally, assured, that it hadn't, he picked up his bundle and continued on to the roof.

He found it difficult to wedge his six-foot bulk into the ship, built for a much smaller being as it was. But he managed to squeeze in and get the door shut. The controls were simple. A short study, and he had the ship in the air and was soaring forever away from the laboratories and the city.

He needed a place to work now, as well as a shelter from the weather. He remembered a certain mountain region, where, in Jennak Pon's company, he had spent many pleasant hours. There was a cave there in the mountains, a large and airy cave, with a clean, sandy floor. The cave would be his home until the weapon was completed.

The light of the moon, breaking occasionally through gaps in the clouds, guided him in his search for landmarks. But the search was a difficult one, unfamiliar as he was with the outside world and the handling of the ship. He was exhausted when he finally found the cave.

He had to hide, had to conceal every trace of himself completely. There would be no rest until this was done.

Awkwardly, but with a confidence that had grown through his handling of it, he nosed the little Varu airship into the cave, keeping the power on until a farther wall stopped his advance. Then he cut the motor, and the ship settled to the floor with a thud.

He left the ship and went to the mouth of the cave. He looked up into the night sky, breathing deeply. The clouds had gathered thickly before the face of the moon, and it was very dark. A cool breeze stirred with a kind of restlessness around him, and faint and eerie came the rustle of the leaves of the trees growing up the slope. There was no peace in the night. It was brooding and ominous, alive with frightened whispers, filled with a dreadful expectancy.

Omega stared up into the night sky, watching and listening. And then that for which he had been waiting came.

A fleet of Varu ships. Their flying lights were bright motes in the sky. For an instant their combined drone was loud in his ears, then their lights and their noise were gone. They were traveling very swiftly.

The dead Varu scientist in the hall had been discovered. The nature of his death had indicated only one person who could have had the strength to do that. And that person had been gone. The Varu were seeking him now, seeking him with all the feral hate and determination that they had earlier sought his people.

OMEGA GAZED after the ships, the corners of his lips turned down in a smile of grim mockery. Sard Mil would be in command, he knew. Sard Mil, the Varu who, according to the records, had been cheated of the honor of killing him by another commander, dead now. Sard Mil still wanted that honor, and

was hot on what he thought was the trail of the last Earthling.

The Varu, of course, did not know of his great intelligence and the deadly purpose which had really motivated his escape. They thought merely that he had somehow discovered that he was to be put to death, and was trying to put as many miles between the city and himself as he could. They would never have expected him to remain as close to the city as he actually was.

They would keep searching until they eventually found him. But by that time the weapon would be completed.

Omega returned to the ship and pulled out his bundles. From one of these he produced a slim length of metal that he had ground to razor sharpness. He ran up the slope to the trees, selected several, and began cutting them down. They were firs and pines, soft-wooded, and the task of cutting them down went rapidly. Omega was careful to space his feelings wide apart, so that no clear area would be left to draw suspicion from the hunters in the sky. Later he intended to cut the stumps level with the ground and cover them with earth and leaves. But there was no time for that now.

One by one, he dragged the felled trees to the cave, shoving them down into the soft, sandy soil before the entrance. When he was done, he had achieved a camouflage effect that was not unnatural. The trees hiding the cave mouth would blend in nicely with the others growing up the slope.

With a branch, he smoothed out his tracks from the soil around the cave entrance. Then, assured that these first precautions against discovery would serve, he spread out one of the blankets in the interior of

the cave and fell into an exhausted slumber.

Day merged into day, night into night, and Omega, working frantically upon his weapon in his hideout, lost all sense of the passing of time. He grew thin and haggard, and a wild gleam deepened in his eyes.

He lived like a hunted animal there in the cave. He had planted trees more thickly about the entrance, and the interior was filled perpetually with a solemn gloom, so that it was only by the glow of a tiny atom lamp that he could see to work upon the more delicate and intricate details of his weapon.

The Varu still sought him. Daily their ships whined past in the sky, seeking, seeking, with a growing frenzy and frustration.

It was only at night that he dared leave the cave to get water and food. And to secure the latter he took his most dangerous risks, for he was forced to forage far from the cave. He subsisted upon berries, nuts, and several varieties of plants which he had found to be edible by cautious experimentation. Occasionally he brought down small animals with a crude hand blaster that he had fashioned from an extra atom lamp.

Omega worked, the weapon rushing to completion under his flying hands. And all the while that strange mental command drove him on and on like a goad. Rest was only periods of oblivion into which he dropped while laboring, the tools still in his hands.

His hate was an impatience that would know no rest until the last Varu was gone. The inexplicable will which drove him on to the same goal was a burning urgency. And the ships in the sky that whined in their search made his mind scream for haste, haste.

Omega gritted his teeth and worked on. Day merged into day, night into night. And then—

AND THEN, one evening when the moon was a silver sphere edging above the far horizon, the weapon was finished at last. The knowledge that his duty was soon now to be fulfilled was like an exhilarating drug to Omega. His eyes flashed in his lined, pale face.

But even now there could be no rest for his wracked body, for the ships of the Varu had become more concentrated in the region of the cave of late, and it was ominously certain that they had found some clue that had put them hot on his trail. A footprint in mud, a tree seared accidentally by the hand blaster—

Haste, haste. Power, now, for the weapon that was to bring death to the Varu. He removed the small but enormously powerful atom motor which ran the propelling mechanism of the air-ship he had hidden in the cave. To this he connected his weapon. Then—he was ready.

But he hesitated. Would it work? What if there were some flaw in the hastily-built mechanism of the weapon? The principle was correct. And so were the formulas. Of these latter he was certain, for he had checked and rechecked them to the point where they ran like a maddening song through his head. But it is difficult to express in concrete materials the sheer, flawless abstract beauty of mathematics.

Almost he was afraid to continue. He could not fail in his duty to his vanished race, that of wiping out their murderers. But there was no time to remove the uncertainties which tortured him. Varu hunters were whining hungrily in the sky,

coming closer, closer. There was no time—

Omega's lips tightened to a pale line. He strode abruptly to the mouth of the cave and hurled the concealing trees aside. Moonlight streamed in with a rush. He picked up the gleaming, cubical shape of his weapon, from which cables trailed to the atom motor, and strode out into the moonlight and the breeze.

Cradling the deadly thing, he looked up into the sky. Bright motes were whining up there, seeking, seeking, with a hunger that had grown more intense. He waited until they saw him standing there in the moonlight. The motes danced excitedly, gathered together, then they came down. They came down like starved things pouncing, their beams stabbing out like eager tongues.

Omega lifted the weapon. His eyes were glittering and his lips were twisted in a soundless snarl. He touched switches, pointed the two cones in the front at the downward hurtling vessels. A chill tingling enveloped his body.

Like ripples spreading upon the surface of a pool, the vibrations leaped out from the cones. The vibrations would shatter the infinitely complex and delicate crystalline structures that were the brains of the Varu.

The vibrations were leaping out from the cones, and Omega's body was tingling. In the sky the beams flickered out, simultaneously, as though a button had been pressed to extinguish them. And because there was nothing to cut their power, the ships hurtled on. Past Omega and the cave they went, unguided hulks of metal. Their crashing back in the mountains was a thing that shook the ground and thundered upon the air.

OMEGA TURNED, then, and pointed the cones in the direction of the city. He had remained near the city so that his deadly work would be all the more thorough.

He kept the cones pointed in the direction of the city until the weight of the weapon became unbearable. The moon peered down, an all-seeing eye, unmoved. There was only one city of the Varu on all the Earth. There hadn't been enough Varu to make others worth while. So the work of the weapon was thorough.

At last Omega gave in to the screaming exhaustion of his body and sank down to the ground. The terrific nervous strain and the many, many sleepless days and nights piled upon him with a rush. His form shook, as though moved by something that was a commingling of a vast triumph and relief. Then he slept, bathed in the moon's silver illumination.

His duty was fulfilled.

A silver speck glinted in the sunlight. It was high in the sky, traveling slowly. Occasionally it would descend with a sudden swiftness, like a heart quickened with hope. Then it would rise again, slowly and wearily, and continue onward.

It was a Varu air-ship that looked strangely like a sphere cut through the center by a disc. Omega sat at the controls.

For days now he had been roaming the Earth, seeking for something he knew he would never find. But he still sought, as though he could not be convinced. Life—intelligent life—was gone. There were birds and there were small animals. There were fishes in the waters. But on all the Earth there was no intelligent life, save himself.

He was lonely with a vast loneliness that pressed upon him like a weight. In all the smiling green of the land,

the fresh breezes and the sunshine, he could find no solace. His aloneness was a bitter acid eating into his mind. The last intelligent being upon all the Earth—

The Varu were gone, for the weapon had worked and had been thorough in its working. They had died by the hand of one whose race they had murdered. Their city was a great and glittering coffin upon the surface of the planet that was to have been the spoil of their conquest. Their dreams and their glories had tumbled into dust with the pressing of a switch.

There were gone even as the Earthlings had gone before them, but more mercifully. Death had come quickly. Its pangs had been too brief for realization.

Intelligent life was gone now, and Omega was alone. He was bent and lined with that knowledge. His hands upon the controls were listless, as though death were to welcome a thing to avoid. But not just yet—An answer to a last question that bothered him—then.

He turned the ship about, sent it soaring with increased speed. Towers and spires leaped into view on the horizon, grew, and became a city. It was the city of the Varu, a place of the dead, for bodies lay sprawled everywhere in the streets and buildings. A coffin for a race—

Omega landed his ship upon the roof of the Council Building. He made his way quickly to the Chamber of the Archives, keeping his eyes straight ahead in an attempt to avoid the scenes of death all about him. In that room, where the records of the Council were kept, he did some searching.

AND FINALLY he found it. He had wanted to know the location of the place where he had been dis-

covered by the Varu; the place, also, where the last of the Earthlings had died. Now he knew. Something like peace and calm was coming over him.

He returned to his ship, and soared up into the bright, blue sky where the sun was shining. The city dropped away unheeded behind him. His eyes were filled with a quiet gladness.

He was going to join his people.

It was evening when Omega was certain at last that he had found the exact location of the village. He brought down the ship and walked slowly to the ruins, his bright eyes glancing about quickly like a man returning home after a long, long time and wishing to recall old scenes in his mind.

There was little left of the village to tell what sort of a place it had been. The foundation stones were blackened and cracked, the timbers charred. Trees and plants grew thickly, and deep gulleys criss-crossed everywhere, scars left where the beams of the Varu had seared on that day so long ago.

Omega nodded slowly. This was all vast peace and comfort in his eyes. This was home. He was so tired. He had come home to rest.

In the sky the sun was setting. Its dying rays made a rose and gold glory of the horizon. A cool wind was moving through the trees, making soft, rustling sounds that were like voices he had known. They were calling to him, gently and soothingly.

Omega nodded slowly. This was all so very appropriate. He would go out with the sun, laying himself down to rest in this place that was home. And the winds in the trees would make music over him for all eternity.

He fumbled at his belt, looked down at the hand blaster that he held in his palm, the crude little weapon he had fashioned from an atom lamp.

In that mystical place where the dead go, he intended to join his people.

His eyes on the setting sun, he raised the weapon to his head. His finger tautened upon the release switch.

And then, of a sudden, there came a shout. It came with the startling unexpectedness of a thunderclap out of a clear sky. Incredulous, wildly amazed, Omega whirled around. Turned, to see figures running toward him. Beings just like himself.

The hand blaster fell from his slackened grip. His hands were numb, his body was numb. He stared, trying desperately to convince himself that this was a hallucination, that he had already pulled the trigger and was in that other land. But the figures came on, rapidly, inexorably.

Then they were all about him, and their hands were upon him, and their voices were a chaotic thing in his ears. He reeled and would have fallen but for the bodies pressed against him and the arms that enwrapped him. They knew him, he thought dimly and terribly bewilderedly. They were greeting him like a loved one long gone. They knew him. He didn't understand how or why, but gladness was a fountain springing up turbulently within him.

Soft and still, the darkness came.

With his people, Omega was building. Phoenix-like, a new village was arising from the ashes of the old.

AXE STROKES sounded in the forests, and figures worked in the cleared fields. Here and there groups returned from forage and hunting parties, some carrying meat and others woven baskets filled with nuts and fruits. There was activity and there was sunshine, and there was great happiness.

Omega was learning the language

of his people rapidly. Already he could carry on simple conversations. But he was impatient to gain complete mastery of this tongue which he had barely begun learning while a child, for he felt that something momentous awaited him, something which would be understandable only when he knew all the words.

Often he would catch a sly, teasing brightness in the eyes of the others, as though they were trying ineffectually to conceal some future surprise. It seemed that a secret was being held that was to be divulged only when he knew the language thoroughly. He thought that this secret was linked to the strange fact that they knew him and had been expecting him.

Other questions bothered him. According to the records of the Varu, every last Earthling had been exterminated. Yet here were a large group of Earthlings, numbering almost fifty. How was it that they had escaped the Varu? And very pale and thin his people were, as if they had been long absent from sunlight and the things that round a body with vibrant life. Why was this? He thought he knew, but was not certain.

Curiosity burned violently within Omega. He tried often to question Old Hank, the leader of the tribe, even to extract some very vague hint. But the aged and whiskered patriarch would beat off every attempt with a smile and a shake of his grey head.

"You aren't ready yet, son," the old man would say. "Just keep on learning how to talk like us."

So Omega contented himself with the thought that the information would be forthcoming in but a short time now. He worked hard and studied hard, and life was very good.

One evening Old Hank gave a signal that had obviously been agreed upon long before, since almost instantly there was a stir of excitement

which was rendered lurid by the flaring up of lighted torches. Omega felt the impact of many eyes upon him, and his heart leaped. The secret concerning him was to be revealed.

Old Hank approached him, carrying a torch like the others.

"Well, son, I guess you're ready. Tonight you're going to learn what everything is all about, but right now we've got something to show you. Get a torch and come along."

Omega did as requested, then fell into step beside the old man, who formed the lead of a long column of eerily flickering lights. His thoughts spun turbulently.

Through the forest they wended their way and to the hills that rose beyond. They skirted the hills, entered a tiny valley. Before a bluff that rose steeply, Old Hank stopped. He gripped the portion of a large rock that projected at waist-high level, pulled. And before Omega's astounded gaze, a door swung in the face of that bluff, where he would never have thought a door could be.

"Be careful," Old Hank cautioned. "The tunnel is rather low for a few hundred feet. From there on—well, you'll see for yourself."

They entered. Down, down, they went, the torches scattering the darkness. Then they halted. Several men disappeared in the gloom ahead, and with their going came a bustle of activity. A whine lifted through the darkness. Omega was almost blinded by a brightness that outrivalled the feeble light of the torches as the light of the sun does the moon. He gasped, stared unbelievably.

For before him, lighted by lamps in the roof, spread a great cavern. And in this cavern was something that was unmistakeably a village.

"Subville," Old Hank said softly.

A HUGE fired burned in the village meeting place. It was more

for ceremony than for warmth, since the night was pleasant. Overhead the stars glittered in all their magnificent display. The entire tribe was gathered about the blaze. They were hushed expectantly, their eyes upon Old Hank.

The old man cleared his throat.

"Folks," he began in a vibrant voice, "tonight we have in our midst one who has almost become a legend among us—Richard Carron!"

There was a great cheer, and Omega frowned in perplexity because he did not quite understand. But realization flooded over him with a dizzy weakness when Old Hank placed an arm about his shoulders.

"Yes, son, you are Richard Carron. You are the saviour of what is left of the Earthling race. But sit down, now, and I will tell you your story."

Memory of that evening was ever to remain with Omega, or Richard Carron, as he was henceforth to be known. It was to be a very dear memory. There was the huge blaze with its cracklings and gyrations, the faces that smiled at him, the cool breeze on his feverish body. There was Old Hank's deep, slow voice. All symbols of his new life and happiness.

Old Hank settled himself and began Richard Carron's story. But it was more than a story of Richard Carron. It was a story of the brilliance, cunning, and fortitude of a race.

"It was your father, Mark Carron who conceived the plan, Richard. He may have been aided by others, including myself, but the plan was entirely his own as regards the basic idea behind it. The others and myself merely added embellishments. Your father was a genius, as few men are.

"At the time Mark Carron gave birth to his scheme—about 1971—we were just a collection of little more than a dozen camouflaged wooden

huts. When the Satans, as we called them—a corruption of "Saturns" from the appearance of their flying ships—destroyed our armies and began destroying our cities, people fled to the wilds to seek escape. But soon the Satans began wiping out the little villages hidden among the hills and mountains, and everyone realized that they were bent on a war of extermination. There was nothing that anyone could do about it. All organized resistance had gone when our armies, having valiantly fought a losing battle for ten terrible years, finally succumbed.

"Your father was certain that the Earthling race was doomed. But he would not accept this fatalistically, nor would he flee from a danger which he knew would inevitably overtake him. He wanted to fight back some way, wanted this with all the determination of his courageous heart. He sought for some method of fighting back which would be successful where the methods of our soldiers and scientists had failed. He found it. It was very subtle, very clever, and very ingenious.

"Your father's plan demanded much precious time in its execution. We had to build Subville and fit it up with the things most necessary for human inhabitation. Fortunately, this region is honeycombed with caves and caverns such as you have seen. But still our task wasn't easy, considering the natural difficulties which we faced and the mental strain under which we labored.

"Subville was ideally suited to our purpose. It was large and well ventilated, and had a temperature which was constant and quite comfortable. It had an underground river which served not only as a source of water, but also as source of power to run our crude electrical generators for lighting the caverns.

"DURING the time that Subville was being made ready, a continual stream of refugees poured into our above-surface village, until it became dangerously large. But they were too valuable to send away, for we needed them not only as helpers but for the precious articles which they brought along. They came afoot, in the last running automobiles, and in carts. They brought with them cooking utensils, metals, and tools. Some even volunteered to return to the ravaged cities and scavenge for the vital things we needed. Many of these were killed in the brave effort, but a goodly number managed to get back.

"We were a rather motley group. Among us were farmers, scientists, technicians, factory laborers, clerks, lawyers, doctors, and many others too numerous to mention or too difficult to classify. Your father himself was a psychologist from a great university, a famous man in his line, and I was an electrical engineer. But in spite of our great diversity of kind, we worked together with a co-ordination as beautiful as that of ants or bees.

"Frantically and desperately, we labored, always expecting each day to be our last. And finally Subville was ready. By this time there were a great many of us living in it. As each family or person entered, he took with him every bit of the material of his former dwelling. In this way we kept our above-surface village from becoming too large, and at the same time procured a vast supply of wood.

"This also served a purpose vital to the plan, that of making the village appear small and inhabited by very few people. Then we stocked Subville with every bit of food available. We even had seeds to grow under special sunlamps.

"Your father's plan now needed one last step before it was completed. Its

eventual success only Fate could determine. This is where you enter. You were about two years old by this time."

Old Hank paused to place a gnarled hand upon the arm of the man who had been known as Omega. His tone grew more intense.

"You, Richard Carron, are actually the center about which the entire plan revolved. Subville, everything, were only minor satellites.

"Mark Carron was a psychologist, a wizard at a science that had progressed tremendously since its conception during the earlier half of the century. He knew the workings of the mind as minutely as a watchmaker does a clock. Thus, with his gifts and ability, he planted in your child mind the seeds of a terrible hatred for the Satans, an irresistible urge to exterminate them as they had endeavored to exterminate us. With this he sowed a super-cunning. All these were timed to germinate and grow when you had reached an age and degree of intelligence which would enable you to carry them out effectively and thoroughly.

"Then a tiny shelter was erected a distance from the village, and you were placed within it. The little that the plan demanded remain of the village was to serve as bait to draw the Satans. To this end, much of the camouflaging material was removed, in order to make it conspicuous from the sky. Lastly, a number of people were required to sacrifice their lives by remaining with the village so that the set-up would seem real. Many—many volunteered.

"The rest retired to Subville, there to live an existence whose length would be determined only by the success of the plan. You were to be left for the Satans to find, far and safe from the awful holocaust that would come when they descended upon the

village. That was tremendously important. Also it was hoped that this would excite their curiosity and compassion—if any.

FOR MARK Carron knew that the only method of fighting the Satans was to do it with their own science and weapons. And this could only be done by one who had access to them. It was his plan that the Satans should find you in such circumstances that they would permit you to live. He was a scientist; he knew scientists, knew that they were the same the Universe over—eternally eager for knowledge. He knew, if the Satans did not have other subjects and if they allowed you to live, that they would want to keep you for study. And once this step was taken, once you reached the proper age, he knew that their doom would be sealed. For at the same time they were studying you, you would be studying them, learning their science, gaining the background and intelligence which would enable you to build a weapon to wipe them out.

"And," the old man's voice rose, "Fate has destined that you succeed.

"There is little more to be told. Life in Subville was hard. It wasn't long until our food gave out; and there were sicknesses. More than half our number died. But we few who remained managed to become adapted to our new environment and exist. At night we were able to leave the cave to hunt for food, since the Satans no longer hunted us, believing all Earthlings gone.

"There was little if any news, and our main topic of conversation was The Plan. We never ceased speculating over its success, and our worries, fears, and hopes were more painful than our sicknesses. You, Richard Carron, became something of a leg-

end among us—a legend of hope.

"After fifteen years had passed, we sent scouts nightly to the ruins of the above-surface village to watch for you; for your father had planted, among the others, the command to return to the site of the village after your duty had been done. We had been growing discouraged until you finally came.

"We are few now—but with the menace of the Satans gone, we can make a new beginning. We will build again, thanks to you, Richard Carron. We thank you deeply and fervently. You will always have our love and respect.

"In conclusion, you are now our leader. We are your people to command, for I am old and we recognize the fact that you have a greater knowledge than any of us. Lead us a little up that long, hard road back to glory, Richard Carron."

Old Hank's voice died away. And the fire had died, too. The people were still. Their eyes, filled with tears yet very bright, were fixed upon the man who was once Omega but now was Richard Carron, their leader.

RICHARD Carron was staring into the embers of the fire. His mind was reeling from the impact of all he had heard. He was filled with a vast wonder and admiration at it all, a humble respect for the great mind that had conceived and engineered the brilliant and daring scheme.

This last troubled him. He turned to Old Hank.

"My father—what became of him?"

The oldster looked away, into the darkness.

"He remained with the village, Richard Carron," came the low and gentle reply. "You see, your mother died when you were born, and he was

never quite the same after that. He loved her deeply. Besides, since his plan called for a sacrifice of lives, he wanted to be among those who died, for his mind would never have been easy otherwise. And he felt that he was no longer needed. His part was done; the rest was up to you and that mystery men call Fate. He died gladly, Richard Carron, and there should be no sorrow or regrets. The future is bright before us. Will you lead us there?"

Richard Carron rose. A vast warmth and a vast joy were surging up within him.

"I will lead you—my people," he said simply. And with their voices ringing tumultuously in his ears, he turned and stumbled off into the darkness. He wanted to be alone a little while, to bring some order to the chaos of his thoughts and emotions.

The breeze moved like a caress through the warmth of the night. The rustlings of the leaves was a paean. The stars were like glints from hap-

py eyes. The whole night was flooded with laughter and joy.

Richard Carron looked back at the village—his village now filled with his people. They would live in the sunlight again, beneath the blue sky, in the fresh winds. They would become brown and they would become strong. They would plant and they would reap. They would be fruitful and they would multiply. And more, they would build again.

And he would be there to lead them. His would be there to aid them over the rough places in the journey that lay ahead. He would try to take them as far up that long, hard road back to glory as his years of life permitted.

He looked at the village, his back straightening and his eyes shining. Someone had thrown more wood on the fire, and though the great blaze had dwindled to ashes, there was still a spark left to ignite the added fuel, and now it flared up brightly.

It was an omen of the future.

THE END

GRASS PILLS

★ By Jon Barry ★

MANY YEARS ago our western plains were excellent pasture for cattle. But today more and more of the land has become barren. Many attempts have been made to reseed the country but most have failed. Recently a new method has had considerable success. With this method, grass seeds are enclosed in small pellets of clay, and dropped to the ground from planes. The clay makes the seeds heavy so that they are not blown away or eaten by birds. They just lay there till a good rain soaks the clay away and they take root. Many acres in Wyoming, Arizona, and Idaho have already been sown with these little pellets. If this system becomes entirely successful, it will mean the restoration of vast areas of grasslands and a great increase in the production of beef.

* * *

LIGHTNING MAGNET

★ By A. Morris ★

DURING the past few months a large electric company has hired a young scientist to watch for lightning to strike the Empire State Building in New York City. He has a great deal of equipment on hand including cameras and recording machines. His findings will help the men in the laboratories discover ways of protecting electrical machines from being damaged by electricity. The radio antenna on top of the building is often struck during an electrical storm. One summer it was struck twelve times in one day. But it is never damaged by these bolts because the building's steel structure acts like a lightning rod and gives the lightning an easy path to the ground. Just by being the tallest building and attracting the lightning and grounding it, the Empire State Building actually protects other buildings near by.

GEHENNA, INCORPORATED

By Berkeley Livingston

Digging a hole to the lava core of the earth would produce a lot of power — a lot more than bargained for, perhaps!

THE SHUTTLE car was rolling back to operations headquarters. Vic Stewart sat at the controls, lines of weariness biting deeply along the strong jaws and indenting the forehead with a perpetual frown.

"How much longer and further we got to go, Meredith?" he asked.

"Hard to say," Bill Meredith replied. "Maybe six months, maybe a year, maybe tomorrow. And the same could be said as to the distance. Why?"

Vic wiped the sweat from his eyes. The car was practically sound and airtight and hot as blazes. His body was tensed from strain. Meredith, on the other hand, was lax and completely at ease as he sat forward alongside Vic and watched the bare rock slide backward as the car sped forward. His lean tanned face had a look of eagerness and youth about it that his companion's no longer had, yet both were about the same age.

"Well," Vic said. "I've been down here in this tunnel for three months now. Gettin' kinda tired, if you know what I mean?"

"Sure," Meredith replied. "I understand. Let's see... You've been in operations for a little better than a year. Right?"

"Yep! Vic Stewart, the bear for punishment. So it's been a year, eh? Seems like ten years. No wonder they give six month contracts. A guy could go crazy working the tunnel. Say! Maybe I've turned psycho, too?"

Meredith grinned, leaned forward and patted the other's shoulder affectionately. "Not Vic Stewart," he said. "Anyone else, but not old Vic."

Vic growled a laugh out of his throat. "Bill. Tell me what it's like up above. Haven't seen the sun or smelled fresh air in fourteen months. And even a vicarious pleasure would be enough for me today."

"Well," said the other. "I can't really say. My nose hasn't had much of a chance to lift from the grindstone of Grant and Company."

A far-away look came to life in Vic Stewart's eyes, and the frown deepened perceptibly on his forehead. It was evident the mention of Grant and Company had set off a train of unpleasant thoughts. Suddenly he turned and faced Meredith.

"That, bosom buddy, seems to be the universal complaint. Grant and Company—" Vic stopped looked at the other from under lowered lids and turned again to the controls.

"Go on, Vic," Meredith said. His face was as placid as the waters of a mill pond.

"—Why not?" Vic said reflectively, speaking without looking at his friend, as if the words had to come forth. "You're new in *Gehenna*, Bill. You're gonna hear a lot which will surprise you. Knock you off your pins, in fact. Grant and Company are the unpardonable sin down here."

"So-o—" Meredith's voice was flat, unreflective of thought. "Look, Vic.



Meredith gestured at the screen. "Now try telling me there's no Hell!"

You're batching it. Why don't you come over tonight..for dinner. You've never met my wife and family. And I can promise a night's fun. Sally's sister is staying with us. And you'll like her. What say?"

"You mean a home-cooked meal?" Vic's voice seemed to be liquid, as if he were drooling at the thought. "Just tell me where and what time."

"One eighty six Avenue B," Meredith said. "Cocktails at seven-thirty...."

"Make mine Manhattan!" Vic said. "I'll be there."

AVENUE B ended on a cul-de-sac and one eighty six proved to be the last duplex on the street. Vic Stewart, dressed in sportswear which was a year and a half behind the fashions, yet looking in his lean, hungry way as if they were in the height of fashion, paused for an instant before the sidedoor entrance. Then his finger was jabbing the button.

He wanted to say something, anything, to the vision of loveliness which confronted him at the opening of the door, but his tongue simply refused to function, though his mind was working at the words furiously. Beautiful sweet, wondrous, marvelous, stunning.... There were other words also, but those best described Norma Hale. She was all that and more, as she stood in the tiny vestibule, greeting Vic.

As if understanding his wordless pose, she smiled gently and moved aside, saying as she did:

"So you're the fabulous Vic Stewart? Why, all Bill has done since our arrival, has been talk of you and what you've accomplished. But come in, Vic.... They're waiting on the terrace—with Mannhattans."

Vic grinned at mention of the cocktails and of a sudden the lines of worry and concentration disappeared

from his face and he looked like a hungry boy, hungry for love, affection and fun. Norma felt the sudden lump in her throat and wondered at it. She felt the blood leave her face and bit her lip with small perfect teeth at the realization of her feelings. But other than that there was no other sign of her mental disturbance.

Vic stepped in and she preceded him to the terrace, which was reached through the living room and beyond a pair of French doors. Bill Meredith, his wife, Sally and their son Hayes, were waiting for them.

The cocktails were just right, the meal which followed, was superb, and the talk had just the right tone. Vic learned that Norma was twenty two years old, a public relations executive in a large firm, possessed a M. S. degree from Columbia, and loved tennis, Vic's favorite sport.

Hayes, an intelligent lad of ten, said good-night, kissed his mother and father and aunt, and shook hands with a grave air and left for his room. Then the talk became less general and more specific and direct.

The three of them seemed to pounce on Vic, so did the talk converge in his directions. There were questions of operation, of the health of the workers, of how far the work had gone. Vic answered most of them with smiling agreeability. Then he noticed a strange fact. It was as if the talk and questioning had a direct way, as if they were on the quest of a particular answer.

"...Now look, gang!" he said after a while. "How about telling me of the upstairs world? Y'know, I haven't heard anything of what goes on up there in a long time."

IT WAS Norma who replied: "It hasn't changed much, Vic. Only for some people. I might as well tell you. I'm also working for Grant and

Company, though indirectly.

"And I'm here for one reason. To break down the bad impression which is current above about what's going on down here. This has proved to be a very expensive proposition, and not alone in money expended. For every foot of tunnel a life is lost. The impression above is that Grant and Company doesn't give a damn what it costs, in any direction."

"Maybe they're right in their impression," Vic said.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Bill said, leaning forward in his chair and peering intently into his friend's face.

"Let's not fence!" Vic said abruptly. "You've been driving for something. So I'll talk, first, and after, listen. I'll spill the proverbial beans, but only on the promise that you'll all do the same."

"Done!" said Norma.

"Okay then. I won't go into the background of this project. It's too well-known for that. But the pitch is this. The discovery was made a few years back that the center of the Earth is in a liquid state. And that tests showed we could obtain from this molten mass enough energy to forget any other we have ever known. So the problem was then resolved to the matter of getting it out.

"Workers had to be obtained, science had to invent the tools by which we could get to the center of the Earth, homes had to be provided for the workers.... But eventually all that was done, the city of Gehenna was built and the vast scheme of drilling started.

"Two companies began operations in a race to see which could get to the center first. The International Court of Laws gave a decision which gave the entire rights of possession and use to that outfit which was first on the scene. So Europeans Inc. and

Grant and Company began the race, each from almost opposite ends. We have dug an approximate eight hundred miles. What and how far they've gone is a mystery. And without saying, it's been a terrific undertaking.

"So the city of Gehenna was built, with eternal artificial light and air, a city enclosed in a shell of plastic material which can and does withstand the most terrific pressure. Men work within the drill itself, vehicles are made so that there can be no such thing as getting the 'bends'. Everything but the human factor has been taken into consideration. And that factor, as far as I'm concerned the most important, was thrown into the discard. Men, as human beings, simply do not exist. The machine is what counts here. And the time has come when the men are going to revolt..."

"So it's true!" Norma broke in. "What the rumors have spoken of have a basis in fact. They said that agitators have been at work, have created discord and discontent down here. That men are laying down on the job—"

"Nor can I blame them!" came the startling words from Vic Stewart.

THE TWO women and the man looked at each other. They acted as if they couldn't believe their ears. Yet Vic got an idea they weren't displeased about what they heard. The opposite, rather.

"You heard me all right," Vic went on. "Listen. In the beginning we got sandhogs, tunnel men. They were used to putting in a eight hour day that is really rough. But down here conditions are different. Three hours is the limit a man can work safely. Heat of a hundred and fifty degrees; constant, unrelenting heat, insufficient safety devices, constant danger at their fingertips. Man! I know. I'm Chief Supervisor, with ten foremen

under me, and two thousand men under them. I *know* what's going on."

"And what's going on?" Meredith asked.

"Various things, but only one I don't like. Don't is a mild word! I should have said, fear. Sabotage."

This time there was a positively triumphant note in Norma's voice:

"So that's it."

"Yes, that's it. But perhaps you don't realize the consequences of such a thing. Bill does, I'm sure. I'll make it plain and put it in simple language.

"We use gigantic drills and after, borers. The borers are complex machines weighing several hundred tons, and are capable of making a hole ten feet in diameter. Now if the sabotage takes place in the borers and something goes wrong the whole planet might go up in one grand burst of fireworks. There is untold pressure on tap and if it's let loose neither I nor anyone else can tell what might happen. This I can say. First the bubble in which this city nestles will be enveloped by gas which in turn will be ignited by some spark. Do I have to say more?"

"And the resultant explosion will seek an exit, that exit provided by the shaft from the surface, an avenue nine miles wide," Meredith said. "But they can't be *that* crazy!"

"The trouble with something like sabotage," Vic said, "is that the saboteur operates from a different set of principles than we do and consequently acts without thought as to the future, other than his act will bring him glory. In this case it will be a glory not found on Earth."

"How far have they gone, Vic?" Norma asked.

"Drill heads broken, tools missing, one borer wrecked beyond repair. And worse, lately, one of the guards found a small leak in the bubble around Gehenna. It was a matter of

good luck that he found it when he did. An emergency crew repaired it quickly. Another day and the pressure would have collapsed the entire city."

"You think it was broken intentionally?" Meredith asked.

Vic shrugged his shoulders. "Impossible to say," he said. "I wouldn't hazard a guess."

Norma sighed deeply, smiled in sudden warmth and said:

"Let's get something on the audio-television. They say there's a new wrestler in New York that's a better actor than Hale Belstrom, the newest interpreter of Shakespeare."

Vic whose mood of light-hearted ease had vanished with the seriousness of their talk, felt a stir of gratitude at the change in subject. Smart girl, he thought. I don't quite dig you, but someday, and soon, I will. He arose and followed the others into the music room and for the balance of the time he was there enjoyed himself. Norma saw him to the door.

"By the way, Vic," she said, as he held her small hand in farewell, "I'm riding down with you and Bill tomorrow. Part of my job. The public must be informed of what goes on...."

"Swell! For once it will be a real pleasure going to work," he said.

She grinned impishly at the sudden light of delight in his eyes. She looked down at her hand, imprisoned in his, and he flushed momentarily, then grinned in return.

"It was so small and cool," he said, "and so nice to hold I hated to let go. I wonder if your—if your...."

"Yes-s—" she urged him.

"Not tonight!" he spoke in abrupt decision. "Another time."

She let it go at that. "Then I'll see you tomorrow," she said.

He nodded and waved good-bye.

"MY GOODNESS!" Norma exclaimed as she made herself

as comfortable as possible in the rather narrow car. "All these processes we went through..."

"Have to, Norma," Bill said. "The pressure down here is much greater than even in Gehenna. And the temperature is not regulated. The men work stripped almost completely. Right now you don't feel a thing; the car is air-conditioned. But once we get on the field... Well. You might be sorry you took the trip."

"Nothing will make me feel sorry," she promised.

Vic gave her a lop-sided grin and thought she sounded rather cocky. He knew that cockiness would disappear very quickly once she stepped into the furnace of the field. He caught a green light looked down at his automatic throttle and saw he was right on the nose. Another two minutes and the shaft they were working would be reached. He called to Bill that it would be soon and Bill undid the strap from about Norma's waist.

"How fast does this thing go?" she asked.

"Four hundred miles an hour, we did it in forty minutes, so you can figure the distance we went."

She whistled softly. H'm! They were a long, long way down.

Then the immense spread of the tunnel field hove into view and a few seconds later they slid into one of the berths at the port.

The instant she stepped from the car she knew what Vic and Bill meant when they mentioned the intense heat. Though she wore only the briefest of halters and trunks, they felt as if they were made of metal. The heat was like some impossible pressure beating at her from all sides. For the first time in her nature life she thought she was sweating, and not perspiring.

"Warm for May, isn't it?" Vic asked, as he led the way to his office.

"And for July too," she said. "I

hope your office is a little cooler."

"Just a bit," he replied. "But don't get your hopes up. "We're stopping only for my work sheet. Then we'll go down to where the boss drill's at work and you can get your work done as quickly as possible."

"Swell," she said. "I know I can't take too much of this."

She flanked Vic on his right with Bill Meredith on his left, as they strolled to the shaft, after Vic got his work sheet. Her eyes took in the immensity of the field in startled surprise. She had an idea it would be immense but she simply had no imagination for its actual size.

The roof arched fifty feet above them, with tremendous sheets of the new metal Soladium hammered flat into the virgin rock. Great columns of the metal acted as supports every five feet. The huge vault extended for miles before them. Vic took a small damp car and motioned for the others to get in.

"It's a couple of miles to the shaft," he said. "By the way, Bill," he turned to Meredith. "You haven't been down either. It'll be an experience for you, too."

THEY WERE at the drilling shaft a few moments later. It reminded Norma of some of the oil rigs she had seen as a youngster when her family took a trip to Oklahoma. The difference lay in the fact that in this rig there were four drills at work. And in the center of a hole fifty feet across lay the elevator shaft.

The operator greeted Vic with hoarse familiarity as the three stepped within the cage. Then turning to his starter he flicked the switch on and the descent began. It was at the most terrific elevator speed Norma had ever experienced. And a short time later they were at the scene of the drilling.

It was a weird scene of seeming confusion. Hundreds of men were at work on the floor. There was the continuous grunt of the drill being pounded into the earth, the clatter and chatter of hundreds of air hammers at work, a vast sound of rumbling, as if the very earth were protesting its violation. And at the drill itself a dozen men stood about, all intent on instruments before them. It was to this group Vic led Norma and Bill.

"Anything new, Sorenson?" Vic asked, after he had introduced his friends.

Sorenson, a giant of a man, whose stripped body gleamed with sweat, shook his head fiercely. "Blasted counter we got doesn't register! Had to use two of the old ones. Radio-activation at the nine mile level. Lots of it."

Vic frowned. That wasn't too good. It meant a lot of work by-passing it and a delay which might take a period of time over which they had no control.

"Run into any fluid stuff again?" Vic asked.

"Drill 4 did. Had to shore up and start all over again."

"That's nice!" Vic said. His voice held a touch of irony. "I'd give a cheer if I didn't know better. What was wrong with that counter? It's the newest gimmick we got."

"Someone fooled with it before it got here. It just doesn't register."

"Nice. Very nice. We might run into a big pocket of the charged stuff at any minute and never know we hit it until it's too late. Any other trouble I should know about?"

Sorenson turned his head to right and left, saw they were quite alone, and whispered:

"Yeah! Molik and his crew are at it again."

Vic's mouth tightened to a thin,

bloodless line. The fly in the ointment. Boris Molik. Molik was a terrific machine man, but also a big trouble-maker. Nothing ever suited him. And he was full of complaints as a child with a bellyache.

"What now?"

"Three of his boys got in the way of a hot load. Two of them died and we had to surface the other."

"Damn! Whose fault was it?" Vic was tense. A hot load was a wall discharge of gaseous steam. Every now and then there was one, and since it was impossible to predict the occurrence, men were getting hurt from it.

"I'd say Molik's. He was lead man in the outfit. And the stuff came from in front, and shortly after he broke ground. He went back for some water a second or two before the stuff broke through the wall," Sorenson said.

"That's the third time," Vic spoke reflectively. "And he's always going back for water just before the break. Have one of the boys bring the jerk here."

"BORIS," Vic began when the black-browed, stocky figure stepped before the small group at the drill head, "this is Miss Norma Hale and Bill Meredith."

He shook his head vigorously at the introduction, his jet eyes seeking something in each face.

"Miss Hale is from the front office and is down here for one reason. To let the people above know what's going on. Now you've been a trouble maker for months. So suppose you shoot your mouth off now and get it over with."

Molik's head jerked toward the grim-faced Stewart. His heavy sloping shoulders, muscled as a wrestler's, heaved slightly, and a smile broke on his lips, showing stained, broken teeth. He spoke with a very small

accent, but in excellent English:

"So. A member of the press, eh? Good! I have waited a long moment for this. So you want Boris Molik to shoot his mouth off, make complaints, tell what his eyes have seen and his heart felt. So-o? Very well, Miss Hale.

"I say that all this is madness! Three thousand men have died. And for what. . . .?"

"Never mind that!" Vic said sharply. "We don't want your philosophy. What's bothering you?"

Molik glowered darkly at Vic. His lower lip came up slightly over his upper in an odd pout.

"Why don't you mind your own business, Stewart?" he asked. "I never liked you and I like you less, now. If you're going to run this interview in your way I'll go back to work right now!"

"Leave him tell his side of the story," Norma stepped in verbally between the two.

"He will, all right!" Vic said grimly. "No fear of that. I just don't like to hear his guff."

"And I don't like to listen to you either!" Molik suddenly shouted.

Molik's bellow focused the attention of the other workers on the small group. Curious eyes watched furtively to see what would happen.

Vic bit his lip, smiled gently, and with a sudden swift movement grabbed Molik by the throat and brought him forward until they stood chest to chest.

"Anytime you want to do anything about it just start," he said.

Molik's answer was a sudden lifting of his knee to Vic's groin. Vic doubled up in pain, and Molik chopped with a thick balled-up first to the side of Vic's jaw, sending the lighter man staggering.

"Hey!" Bill Meredith stepped in and shoved at Molik. "That was a

dirty trick. . . ."

He reeled back as Molik came forward and plowed his fist into his jaw. Norma fell back a few feet, her hand raised to her mouth her eyes mirroring fear. But the few seconds respite Vic got from Bill's interference was enough for him. Like a battering ram he moved in, head low, fists pumping hard close to his sides, his body pivoting at the hips with each swing. And Molik retreated before the relentless attack.

Then Vic shifted his attack. The pummeling fists came higher, to the face and eyes, sending Molik's head back and to the side with each blow. Vic, a better boxer, was but measuring the other for the pay-off punch.

But Vic did not take into account Molik's strength and recuperative powers. Molik took terrific punishment. Then suddenly the stocky man lowered his head and charged forward. Vic sidestepped, and hit downward in a hook. And Molik turned inward with the blow, grabbing Vic's fist and twisting his hand at the same time. Vic was forced to move in the same direction Molik was moving, or have his wrist broken. It was an old wrestling trick.

AS VIC came in Molik shifted suddenly and threw Vic over his right hip. But his grasp was still strong on Vic's wrist. There was a wild look of triumph in Molik's eyes as he stooped over the man on the ground. Now his left hand joined his right and as Vic lay prone, he saw what the other intended, to break his hand at the elbow.

With the speed of a striking snake Vic shot both feet upward and Molik flew backward, blood spurting from a broken nose and cut mouth, where Vic's heels had caught him.

On the instant Vic came erect and moved warily toward the fallen man.

But only for a second. Then he became aware of the circle of workers.

"All right!" he stiffened and faced about to them. "Party's over. Back to work."

But something was amiss. Instead of complying with his order they stood their ground. And on each face he read the same glowering message of hate. They were waiting for something, a spark perhaps, Vic thought. Molik provided that spark.

"Get them!" he shouted through the funnel of his fingers trying to stop the crimson tide of blood. "Don't let them get away."

"Sorenson! Haley!" Vic suddenly shouted. "This way."

But it was too late. They were fifty to one and they simply overpowered them by sheer numbers. Vic went down under the bodies of six of the sweaty muckers of Molik's crew. The last conscious thing he saw, something which made him go berserk with rage, was the sight of three of the half-nude figures fall on Norma and bear her to the ground.

Then the world seemed to hit Vic on the temple and he fell into a black curtain of velvet softness. . . .

VIC... VIC! a voice was urging him out of the black pit.

He tried to rise but the effort was too much for him. He fell back and shooting stars swam before his vision as he banged his head on the bare rock of the floor. But it brought him to full consciousness at least.

Bill and Norma were kneeling at his side. A half dozen other figures stood about, among them the bloody one of the giant Sorenson. Vic lifted an arm and Bill grabbed it and helped him come to his feet.

"What happened?" Vic asked.

"Molik's taken over," Bill said.

"What happened to Sorenson's crew?"

"Five of them were killed and the rest are there."

"Normal! You're all right?" Vic asked, stepping to her side and taking her arm.

She smiled up at his concern and shook her head. "All right, Vic," she said. "It was you I was worried about. You seemed to have gone crazy and I was afraid they'd hurt you."

"Just a few lumps. I've had 'em before. It was you had me worried. The way they grabbed you. I could have killed them."

For an instant there was an indefinable something in her eyes. Then it was gone, and Vic could only wonder at what he had seen. They turned at the sound of footsteps. It was Sorenson and his crew, or what was left of them.

"Looks like Molik lost his head," Sorenson said. He was still bleeding from a cut over the nose, and one of his eyes was closed.

"Yeah," Vic agreed. "Unless he's got others to go along. But all I can see is trouble for that fathead. He can't think he's going to come out on top—"

"Maybe," Sorenson surprised Vic. "They've got energy guns. At least four of them. And Molik is operating on a preconceived plan."

"Someone's going to worry about the girl," Vic said. "Many's the time we stayed on down here for days. So it's entirely possible they won't think about us above. But the girl. . . ."

"That's why I say Molik lost his head," Sorenson said. "He'll have to improvise now. Something I don't think he's too good at."

"Well," Bill broke in. "Now that you've settled the future of Molik, suppose you fellas get to work on us."

"Look, Bill," Vic said sharply. "As long as Molik has those energy guns he's top dog. One blast and we'd be dust, settling on the floor. So just re-

lax for a while...."

SORENSEN had hit the nail squarely on the head when he said Molik couldn't improvise well. At that moment he was pacing back and forth before the lift. His face was swollen and discolored from the pounding Vic's fists had given it. Now and then he would pause and look darkly upward, as if in indecision, then once again resume his restless pacing.

Squatting on their haunches were his seconds, a Eurasian of varied breed, small, lean, vicious-eyed, called Dao San; and a lanky Englishman with a bad cast in one eye, and a penchant for using a knife, a man named Sam Higgins.

"Looks like Boris swallowed a bit more'n he c'n chew," Higgins observed.

"I think our friend is worried about the woman," San remarked. "He has reason to be. They bring nothing but trouble. It is my opinion that all women should be strangled the instant they begin to talk. Their mouths are the nooses in which we entangle ourselves."

Higgins squealed in laughter. "Hee-hee! But sometimes it's pleasant to die in the noose," he observed.

"You are a pig," San said without malice. "A gross pig."

"Wrong, San. Just sensible, that's Sam Higgins. I never think about the future. The present's hard enough to work with. Now take Boris. He wants to be the big-shot but he just ain't got the capacity. Me, I just take what comes along and don't worry none about the morrow."

"A most sensible attitude," San agreed with the other. "Aah! I think our friend has made a decision. Here he comes...."

Boris scowled darkly down at the two. As San had said, he had made

his mind up. He was going to risk the future on a single cast of the dice. It was to be all or nothing. If he failed, he shrugged his shoulders. Failure was better not thought of.

"San, Higgins," he began, "there's no use in just sitting down in this hole anymore. We might as well finish what has been begun. Take two crews upstairs. And with them take four energy guns, concealed of course. We can't risk exposure, so clean up everything up there. We must gain control of the whole area. I'll stay down here for a spell and map out a plan of future operations."

Without a word the two men rose and started out for their crews. Boris, still scowling watched them depart. He had planned well and long and now the moment of decision had arrived. The dice were cast and there was no turning back.

Molik had been hired at the very beginning when the contest had started, by Europeans Inc. His job was that of sabotage. But with the passing of time Molik had come to the realization that whoever controlled the workings could name his own price. His men had infiltrated everywhere. He knew even better and to a greater capacity, the exact distance covered by the master drill. The readings of the gauges had been transmitted to him even before they reached Vic Stewart.

He knew, for instance, a fact Vic wasn't aware of. A piece of scientific apparatus had been put into use, apparatus Vic had no knowledge of, yet which had been sent to the field office. This wondrous gauge measured the amount of energy in the rock which had been drilled out. By this means the drilling could be determined exactly. And Boris knew it was a matter of a very short time and their goal would be reached.

With this knowledge Molik felt

he had the best hand to play.

He watched the hundred men file into the gigantic cage and saw it zoom upward. Then he called to several men, with strange-looking weapons cradled in their arms, and started out to where the prisoners were.

“LOOKS LIKE the head rat is heading this way,” Sorenson observed.

“Too bad he’s got his bully boys with him,” Vic said. “I’d like to finish what I started.”

Norma’s hand fell on his arm. “Please, Vic. No trouble!”

He smiled into her eyes. “Don’t worry, baby,” he said. “I won’t start anything. Not until you’re in a safe spot, anyway.”

Molik’s cold glance travelled over them as he stood, hands held on hips, legs spread wide, shoulders hunched, the naked, hairy chest gleaming with sweat. “So—o! Now Molik gives the orders, eh? Very well, then. I want no trouble from any of you. I have placed men with guns to watch you for the present. When my men have returned from the field above I will determine what will be done with you.”

“That’s decent of you, Molik,” Vic said. “But tell me. What’s this all about? You’re not thinking you can win out, are you?”

For the first time the face lost its scowl. A thin smile broke on the man’s lips. “And why not?” Molik asked. “Is it so much a thing of doubt? Do not be fooled by circumstances. Down here we are the masters of the world, no matter what those above may think. They above created a Frankenstein and unless they cater to us that monster will destroy them.”

“Don’t be a damn fool!” Vic said sharply. “They’ll send a regiment down here and wipe you up as if you

were spittle on the walk.”

“Bah! You talk but like a child, talk without cerebration. Molik’s no fool. He has the drills and borers. And he has something you don’t have, the knowledge that we are within a hundred yards of our goal. Let them try to use force. I will blow this whole world to bits, and them with it!”

They all read the same message of madness in Molik’s eyes. He would do precisely as he said, if anyone tried to cross his path. But what did he want? Power? Money? It was so hard to read those eyes, eyes which were like flat-surfaced marbles.

Molik gestured for the gun-bearing guards to come close.

“Bring these down to where the drill is coring,” he said. “I want them where they’ll be close at hand.

“HOW LONG have we been down here?” Bill Meredith asked feverishly.

Vic glanced at his watch. “About eight hours.”

“I can’t take too much more of this,” Bill said, as he began a quick pacing back and forth in the narrow area of their prison compound.

“Easy, Bill,” Vic cautioned as he rose from where he had been seated at Norma’s side, and joined his friend.

“Easy hell!” Bill growled. “I’m worried about my wife and boy up there. This Molik’s crazy! He’ll blow up the whole world.”

“No he won’t,” Vic said. “He gains nothing by doing that. There won’t be any glory for him, then. And guys like Molik have to have their glory.”

Suddenly Bill’s voice was a tense whisper: “Vic! Those guards are getting lax. Let’s rush them. I’ve been watching.”

“So have I,” Vic whispered in return. “Another while and we will. I shifted Sorenson and a couple of

others where they'll be in position for a quick rush."

"What about Norma?" Bill asked.

"She'll be safe—if we get to the guards in a hurry."

Bill gave his friend a quick side-long look. There were new lines in the face and an even more determined look to the jaw. Vic went on:

"It happened kind of quick, my love for your sister-in-law. But I guess there isn't much choice. The world or my love... Well, Bill, let's get back before the guards get nervous. And watch me for the signal."

As if woman's instinct were a live thing Norma snuggled close to Vic. She said nothing but the press of her fingers in his told him volumes. "Whatever happens," she whispered, "I love you Vic. I'm not even asking how or why. Just content for this moment and any other that may follow."

Once more the march of the hours went on. Interminable waiting. They had been shoved into a sort of angle of rock, for the reason they would be easy to watch. Now and then they saw men swagger past, carrying tools of one sort or another. The growling and crunching of machinery went on apace. Molik had disappeared on some mysterious mission of his own.

There were three guards, each armed with the odd-shaped energy gun. They stood or marched past the wide opening of the angle. Now and then one or two sat or leaned against the wall. But always one of them was facing the prisoners. Vic became aware of an increased activity. And became aware also that the drilling had stopped.

Then Molik was before them, a glitter of triumph on his face.

"Gehenna has received my ultimatum!" he growled in his hoarse accented voice. "And they have accepted."

The prisoners looked at each other in consternation. Had Molik won without a fight?

"....And now you will be privileged to be at the scene of my triumph. I am having all of you brought down to the last boring."

Norma looked puzzled and Vic explained in a low voice:

"Molik has reached our goal, evidently. We have a special machine whose purpose it is to cap the opening, just as in an oil well. Without the capping machine the gases would escape and all hell would break loose. Stay close to me, my darling—"

THERE WERE fully a thousand men before the opening. They were tense, expectant, triumphant, and frightened, all in one. Not a sound came from their lips as the eight prisoners were brought to the small cage which would take them down to where the boring machine was to make its last operation.

Molik, his lieutenants and the three armed guards crowded in after the prisoners. At a signal from Molik the operator sent the cage downward in a sudden rush. Norma pressed as close to Vic as she could and watched the walls slide past through the bars of the almost open cage.

The elevator stopped with a suddenness which almost spilled them out. To Vic, Sorenson, and the rest of the scene was a familiar one. But to Norma and Bill Meredith it was fantasy. The place was lighted with a radiance that was like silver in its gleam. Vapors escaped the basalt rocks, vapors which were sulphurous in their odor. Huge hoses of metal snaked their lengths along the uneven floor. Directly ahead stood the gigantic borer, its nozzle, like the snout of some huge prehistoric mon-

ster, stuck into the ground. The din of its operation was terrific in the confined space. Several dozen men tended the borer and several dozen more the various other equipment which was component to it.

"Come, Stewart," Molik said. "Let me show you the fine instrument you never got. Already we are within a dozen yards of our goal,"

Though the heat was intense Vic felt a fine bead of cold sweat break out over him as he looked at the wondrous gauge Molik paraded for his benefit. It was calibrated in inches and as Molik said, there was but a dozen yards to go. Vic's eyes took in all the other gauges. He noticed something which seemed to have escaped the eyes of Molik. There was an intense area of radio-active rock close by. The counter was swinging wildly.

He acted casual, disinterested as he turned to Molik. But his eyes never left off looking at the counter. It was pointed in the same direction as the new instrument, which meant the radio-activation would be reached at about the same time or perhaps a few yards before. He had to bank on it being before. The borer would stop its work automatically.

"I see you are," Vic said. He placed his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels. "But one can never tell, Molik. The best laid plans might stray...."

"Quotations, my friend, do not interest me," Molik said. "I have the natural desire to have someone see and note my moment of triumph. As soon as the goal is reached Dao San and Higgins will break the news and then I have nothing to do but wait for the representatives of Grant and Company and Europeans Inc."

"I see. You're going to let the highest bidder win," Vic said.

"And why not? The one who has the use of these facilities can control

the world. They will buy at my price."

"And what's your price?" Vic asked, suddenly tense as he saw the needle had swung abruptly to zero.

"Absolute control!" Molik stated flatly.

VIC GAVE THE signal Sorenson and the others had been waiting. The sudden stillness which had come on at the cessation of operations was like the sound of thunder from a cloudless sky.

Instantly Sorenson and the remains of his crew leaped to the attack. Nor was Vic a whit behind. Forgotten were the rules of fair play. His fist pounded a sledgehammer blow to Molik's groin, doubling the man up in pain and staggering him backward. Grasping Norma by one arm Vic raced for the cab of the borer.

But he was not to reach it without a fight. As though divining his intentions, Sam Higgins leaped in front of the two. Vic spun Norma aside as Higgins suddenly brandished the knife he always carried in the belt of his trunks.

"Not so fast, Stewart!" Higgins growled as he went into a crouch.

"Out of my way or I'll kill you!" Vic said stonily as he advanced in short, mincing steps.

"This does the killing, not talk," Higgins said, and suddenly leaped in.

Vic dodged and tried to trip the other. But Higgins jumped over the outthrust foot and pivoted swiftly, slicing with a quick twist of his wrist. The knife nicked Vic and drew a thin line of blood from his side. Once more the circling dance was resumed.

This time it was Vic who leaped in. Straight for the other he jumped, but at the last second, like a tackler who anticipates the runner's intention, so did Vic twist, almost in mid-

air, and came in low for the other's knees.

Higgins tried to leap aside but didn't quite make it. He slashed downward as Vic took him off his feet but the blow was weak and had no aim. Then the two were at close grips. Vic grabbed the knife hand with the fingers of his right hand and tried to twist it free. But the Englishman had the fingers of one hand about Vic's throat. So they strained and wrestled on the ground, first one then the other on top. There was no question in their minds but that the one who arose would leave a dead man on the ground.

Higgins' wrist was slippery from sweat and Vic was finding it more and more difficult to keep his grip. As if in from a vast distance Vic could hear the sounds of battle all about him. There had been no firing as yet; the booming sound of an energy gun's discharge was unmistakable. Then he forgot all else as the tide of battle turned against him. He lost his grip on the knife hand and Higgins was on top.

"Now I've got yer!" Higgins growled.

He raised the knife on high, and as he held Vic prisoner between his thighs, plunged the knife down in a savage thrust.

But Vic, too, was slippery with sweat. And as Higgins swung the knife, Vic twisted desperately to escape it. Higgins was thrown off-balance momentarily and the knife missed Vic's body by a fraction of an inch and clattered against the bare stone. There was a clang of steel as the blade broke off at the hilt. And the two were now more evenly matched.

Vic arched his body suddenly and Higgins flew over the other's head and back about five feet. Like a streak of lightning Vic came to

his feet and dove for the other. And this time Vic's tackle was good. Gripping the other by the throat Vic banged his head against the bare stone until there was a horrible sound of breaking bone and blood and grey matter oozed from the shattered skull of the late Sam Higgins.

VIC AROSE on unsteady legs and whirled toward where he had shoved Norma. She was backed against the rock, crouched, wide-eyed and intense. A sob broke her throat as she dashed forward and threw herself into Vic's arms.

He held her close and pressed a kiss fiercely against her lips. She responded as fiercely. But their moment of love was to last only for a second. A loud booming sound broke them apart.

They turned and saw Dao San, his face and body dripping blood, holding an energy gun. He wasn't aiming the gun and from the way he was staggering it was obvious he was sorely wounded. But now and then his finger pressed the trigger and great holes would suddenly appear in the walls as the energy shells bit deep into the rock.

Men lay in the twisted, silent attitudes of death. Here and there one crawled or sat, moaning in pain. Now another gun joined the chorus begun by Dao San. And a third joined in. Vic caught sight of Sorenson, standing at the far end of the pit, holding a gun at his shoulder. He was aiming at Dao San. Then the gun spoke sharply and as if by magic, the Eurasian simply disappeared, and with him, the gun.

As if in echo, came another booming sound. Vic and the girl turned their head at the new sound. And there stood Molik. He had somehow gotten hold of the third gun. It was he who had fired it, and where Sor-

enson had stood, a shower of dust settled on the floor.

"Quickly!" Vic shouted. "Into the borer!"

He ran forward and, dragging the girl after him, leaped into the cab, slamming the door closed behind him. The girl stood at the circular window and watched the carnage continue. Molik was firing wildly neither aiming or caring where the shells hit. Her hand flew to her mouth as she caught sight of Bill Meredith. He had been hurt in the fight. He was crawling along the ground on his belly, a foot at a time. His left arm hung limp. He was crawling toward the maniac figure of Boris Molik.

Then Vic was calling to her.

She ran to him, shouting of what she had seen.

"Look!" Vic commanded, as he pointed to a window-like aperture before him.

She looked and caught her breath. It was like looking into a seething cauldron of flame, like seeing a volcano in action, like being at the birth of Gehenna. It was a vast sea of molten fire, with flames shooting spires for a hundred miles, with gases suddenly bursting into vari-colored flame.

"Molik was right. We have to cap it before it breaks through. Norma! Get to that switch. Soon as I give word, press it."

"But Vic!" she tried to twist him away from the window. "Bill! He's trying to get to Molik. And Molik is crazy. He's shooting in all directions."

"We can't!" Vic twisted out of her grip. "This has to be done first."

"I—I can't, darling! He's Sally's man and I must help him."

Vic tried to grab her but he was a second too late. She was out of the door and gone. There was but a sin-

gle chance. It might work, Vic thought, but it would take perfect timing. Setting the borer's nose straight ahead, Vic set it going and leaped from the seat and for the switch. Flicking it downward, as he passed, Vic leaped out of the cab after Norma.

MOLICK WAS in a crouch. The gun was cradled in one hand. Already there were tiny strings of vapor escaping from the fissures made by the striking shells. But Molik seemed unaware of them. His beady eyes were blank of expression. Spittle drooled from his mouth, as his eyes swept back and forth across the twisted rock floor, as if he were seeking fresh victims for his fire.

Then his eyes centered on the cab. He saw a figure dart from it and an instant later another. Laughing wildly, Molik pressed the trigger of his gun again. The laughter died in his voice. There had been no familiar sound. Once more and again he pressed the trigger before it dawned on him that he was out of ammunition. Flinging the gun from him he leaped forward.

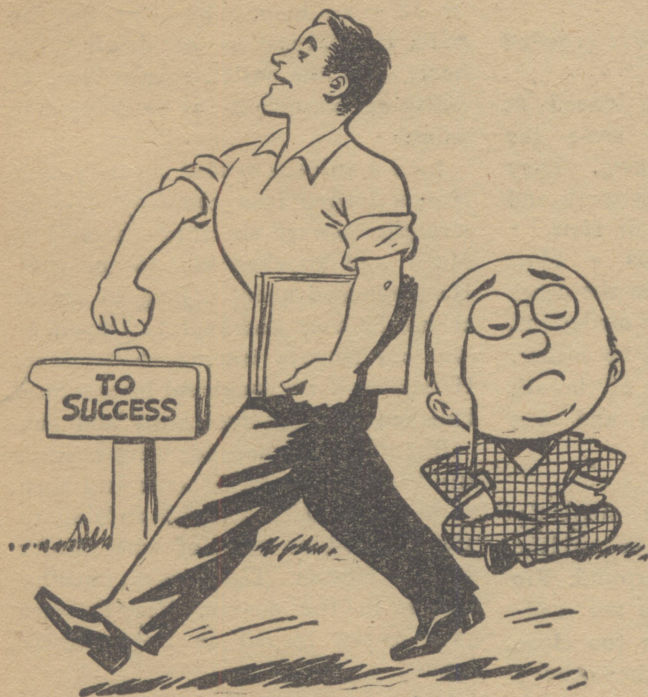
"Bill! Bill!" Norma was screaming. "Watch it! He'll kill you!"

Meredith cursed her under his breath. Despite the pain of a broken arm and the agony of his belly-crawling, he felt he had Molik at a disadvantage. For Molik had been unaware of the fact Meredith was coming up behind him. Norma's voice would warn him...

Raising himself up, Meredith staggered forward toward Molik. He was still several yards from the man when he saw him aim the gun, saw him press futilely at the trigger and divined what had happened. Uttering a mew of triumph, Meredith charged just as Molik ran for the girl.

(Continued On Page 146)

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(Continued From Page 144)

But another reached Norma first and shoved her aside.

"For keeps, this time!" Vic growled as he faced Molik.

Like savages the two leaped at one another. Forgotten were the niceties of formal fighting. They fought as animals do, with teeth and claws and hammer blows of fists.

Now one staggered as a blow knocked him back, and then the other fell back before the savage onslaught. Not a sound was uttered by either, only the broken sound of breath being forced into lungs and out again.

RAGING wildly Molik suddenly grabbed Vic about the middle and wrestled him to the ground. Vic tried to pound a knee into the mad-man's groin but they were too close pressed. He gouged at the other's eyeballs but missed and was rewarded by a blow in his windpipe which made him gag for breath. The ground was sharp with pointed rock and it gouged and bit at the wrestlers. Molik's finger nails ripped shreds of flesh from Vic's cheeks as he also tried for an eye gouge. Vic turned his head and pressed it down against the other's sweaty chest. And suddenly Vic brought his head up sharply.

There was a whip-like crack as Vic's skull took Molik in the chin, and Molik released his hold.

It was enough. Vic shot erect and as Molik tried to follow, Vic kicked him as hard as he could on the jaw. Molik's head smacked against the floor. But if Vic thought the other was through, he was mistaken. Molik rolled away from a second kick and scrambled erect. Lowering his head he hurled himself on Vic once more. The action was unexpected and the smaller man took the blow in the pit of the stomach and fell to the

ground like a poleaxed steer.

And Molik backed away a foot or so then leaped high in the air with the intentions of driving his heels into the fallen man's face. It didn't quite work out as he thought it would.

Like a wildcat protecting its young Norma leaped into the fray. Diving straight forward she threw herself at Molik and knocked him to one side. He staggered about trying to recover his balance and Norma leaped at him her fingers tearing at his face. He struck her a backhand blow which knocked her five feet away and out.

But those few seconds were enough for Vic to recover. If rage had torn at him before, it was as nothing to what he felt at sight of what Molik did to Norma. There was nothing human in the scream Vic Stewart gave as he leaped at Boris Molik again.

Demoniac strength seemed to be his as he drove his fists through the guard thrown up by the other. Time after time his fists broke bone and flesh. And still Molik stood, like a badly-shaken bear, hurt, yet not down. But though Molik was not down the will to fight was gone. It would only be a matter of time before Vic's wild blows would serve their purpose.

Suddenly Molik turned and ran. Vic let his hands fall and a second of utter weakness shook him to the core. He could not have taken a single pursuing step if it meant his life. Not until he saw the goal of Molik's running feet.

Dao San had dropped his gun as the blast of the energy shell took him. The gun was what Molik was seeking. And was going to get before Vic could stop him. As in a daze, Vic saw the man stoop, saw him lift the gun, saw the expression of complete joy and triumph on the broken,

bloody face and saw him aim the gun.

Not even a prayer could save him, Vic knew.

He closed his eyes as the finger tightened on the trigger, and heard the great booming sound of the gun firing.

"Vic! Vic, darling!" he heard Norma's voice as from a vast distance. His eyes opened and widened in unbelief at what they saw. An energy shell had caught Molik's upper body and had torn him in two. Then Vic turned in time to see Bill Meredith, still holding the gun, fall to the floor.

THE MAN and girl reached him at the same time.

"Bill. Bill, are you okay?" Vic asked as he cradled the other's head in his arms.

Norma knelt at Meredith's side and

bit her lip in anxiety.

"Yeah. I'm okay. Just all beat out, that's all."

"You saved his life, Bill!" Norma's voice held an edge of tears and hysteria.

Vic shook her gently to and fro as he let Bill go easily. "Now honey," he cautioned. "Easy does it. We're not quite out of the woods."

"Why?" she asked in a more nearly normal tone.

"Several reasons," he replied. "But first let's get to see how bad Bill is."

The worst of Meredith's wounds was a trifle. But the broken arm would need taking care of. Already the agony of it was taking its toll.

"Now you stay with Bill," Vic told the girl. "I did something just before I ducked out of the cab and
(Concluded on page 152)



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The CLUB HOUSE

Where science fiction fan clubs get together.

Conducted by **ROG PHILLIPS**

THIS ISSUE is being written as I am hurrying to get things cleared away for my trip to the Convention. I'm way behind on correspondence, and I have scads of letters and announcements that should appear in this issue, but must wait until the next one.

It will be my first fan convention. I'll probably walk around bug-eyed like the rest of the newcomers, while the long-time fen show their stuff. But I will get a chance to meet a lot of fellows I've learned to know and like through their letters and fanzines and writings in fanzines. I know I will have lots of fun along with everyone else. There's Milt Rothman, with whom I've been conducting a feud in F.A.P.A., Art Rapp, whom I missed when he passed through Chicago once, and dozens of others. All friends, and all stf fans.

From there I'll be going to New York for the first time, and will meet a lot of fans there. I've heard a lot about the big city, and bought a safety pin to pin up my pocket I keep my wallet in when I ride on the subway where all the pickpockets hang out, so they say in detective stories. I'll take a trip out to the statue of Liberty, the only thing any country in Europe ever gave US, and when no one's looking I'll write, Rog Phillips was here. Then when you go to New York you can go out and look for it. It will be my contribution to history. As long as Liberty and Justice prevails in our country, there will be a record that "Rog Phillips was here."

By the time you are reading this it will be all over. I'll be back in Evanston, where people can stop the bus and ask the driver questions without getting on, and not have him sound off like he owns the city.

Every city has its spirit, and is different like people are different. In fact, a city is a person in many ways, with its personality, ambitions, business, etc..

So is a nation. And one of the finest things about living is to be able to get to know people and cities and nations until they are all like people and friends. The greatest thing in life is friends. (No, I haven't had too much beer. I'm just growing philosophical for the moment with no more in me than a cup of coffee.)

When you don't know people you get exaggerated ideas about them. Will Rogers once said, "I never met anyone I didn't like." That just about sums it up. If you really know a person you generally get to like them, or at least understand them. There are exceptions, of course; but some of those exceptions are due to lack of understanding.

In a way, fandom is a person. A big, growing, rambunctious person, full of humor and spirit. In the last two years I've gotten to know it pretty well. The time isn't far off when fandom will be lost in the mass of people as science fiction comes into its own. It's expanding. It's going into slick magazines, books, and pocket books. I have a pocket book coming out myself which will be on the stands when you read this. It's an original, not a reprint, and is called "Time Trap", and has a very nice cover by Malcolm Smith. It's by Century Publications, and, incidentally, my first story outside magazine form. It isn't too good, but maybe you might enjoy it.

Now we come to the fanzines for review this issue. The best way to get into fandom is to subscribe to some of them and find out what's going on. You'll get plenty of fun and entertainment out of it that will amply repay you.

Ordinarily no special importance is attached to first position in review of fanzines. This time, however, I want to make it a sort of position of honor, welcoming the very first fanzine from Ireland! It's from Walter A. Willis, 170 Upper Newtownards Rd., Belfast, N. Ireland. In a letter accompanying his zine Walter says there are only three actifans that he knows of in Ireland. The art editor of this fanzine, **SLANT**, is James White. The contents page lists Olive Jackson and Cedric Walker as also contributing.

When I read how **SLANT** was produced I thought of the old saying, "Where there's a will there's a way." No mimeo machine could be obtained in Ireland. Walter picked up an old printing press and set the type by hand. Also, and you fan artists in America take note, the illustrations were produced on plywood with a razor blade.

And if those boys in Ireland show remarkable energy, they show as much ability to make the contents worth reading.

Cedric Walker's "All Dogs Are Equal", for example. It's as good a story as you'll find in any prozine, and better written than the average. There's a department called "The Prying Fan". That should call for a revision of the old saying. How about "Out of the prying fan into the mire?" Walt Willis is a natural punster. In his editorial he says, "Printing runs in our family, and I have merely reverted to type."

DAWN: the fanzine from Kentucky, a letterzine; 10c, 3/25c; Lester Fried, 2050 Midland, Louisville 4, Ky. Charles Burbee leads off this issue with a long letter that answers Rick Sneary's defense of NFFF in a previous issue, and also a few other letters that he thought needed answering. I agree with Burbee that the NFFF should not expect fan editors to give NFFF'ers a discount, because they already take a loss on their fanzines. I'm talking about dollars paid out for materials, not wages, because the average fanzine doesn't sell more than a hundred copies and sells for ten cents which includes three cents postage. The seven dollars left after postage has to buy ten to thirty stencils, ink, mimeo paper, staples. It would be interesting to learn from several fan editors how many hours it takes altogether to put out a fanzine, including addressing the copies and mailing them. My guess is at least thirty hours of work

—work they want to do or they wouldn't do it, but work, nevertheless. For no pay, and more often than not with part of the costs coming out of their own pocket. So why should any fan want to get a discount? It should be the other way around.

Ed Cox has second place with a letter about dealers' prices. Evan H. Appelman comes next with a very long letter defending scientists and Dr. Rhine of Duke University, then goes into his idea for a fan better business bureau, of which Burbee, in his letter, said, "Why such an elaborate set-up for perhaps 500 people?" Well, fandom has grown from three hundred names when the CLUB HOUSE first started, to no one knows how many now; but it's a lot more than Burbee suspects, I suspect. Just the same, on reading over Evan Appelman's plans, I can see nothing he has to offer that can't be found already by subscribing to a judicious selection of fanzines regularly.

Rick Sneary follows with a discussion of the choice of convention site. He advocates that it be done by NFFF, with which I don't agree. The annual convention belongs to all fandom and should remain that way. The big objection seems to be to having some local group go to the convention and push through its cause while others don't have a chance because they don't lobby for it. My opinion is that

(Concluded on Page 150)

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THE CLUB HOUSE

(concluded from page 149)

any group strong enough to lobby for it has enough organization and desire to succeed at putting over a successful convention. It would be a shame to have the convention site picked at a spot which cooled off on the idea and did little to make it a success.

Art Rapp has a nice letter to close the letter department, coming up with the statement that DAWN is called DAWN because it's published dawn in Kentucky.

FANTASY-TIMES: twice a month; 10c, 12/\$1.00; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd Ave., Flushing, New York; the newszine that brings you ALL the news of science fiction, from the pro and the fan fields. With nine very active fans on the editorial staff, each a specialist in his own field of news, it would be pretty hard for any other fan newszine to equal it.

Of special interest in one of the latest numbers is the announcement that Rick Sneary was elected president of YOUNG FANDOM, which is an organization for new fans. Rick is one of the finest young men I've ever been privileged to meet. He lives in South Gate, which is a suburb of Los Angeles, or rather a section of that city. He's been a fan a long time, is president of F.A.P.A., and active in many other groups including the N.F.F.F.. This is for both boys and girls. The young lady in charge of the femfans is Arniece Gurley; but drop a line to Rick Sneary at 2962 Santa Ana St., South Gate, California, and you'll get all the details. Be sure and enclose a self addressed stamped envelope, one of the long ones.

SPACEWARP: 9 issues for \$1.00; Art Rapp, 2120 Bay St., Saginaw, Michigan. Art's been bringing this mag out pretty regularly for a couple of years now. It's always entertaining and full of humor and good healthy imaginative fan writing.

The July issue contains "Vicious Circle", by Dan Mulcahy that has plenty of laughs. It's a satirical future history of fandom. "The Psycho Lab" is by Wrai Ballard, who gives this highly entertaining sketch of why he was born: "I was laying around the Embrionic Gardens with the other unborn babies, when up steps this attendant. 'Say bud,' he says. 'I thought you'd be interested to know that there's a mag that specializes in fantasy on the stands. Been out for a couple issues already.' 'Huh?' says I. 'Why wasn't I notified at once? Quick, bring my stork!'"

Wilkie Conner writes one of his Longhammer stories, with a forward, "If H.F. Longhammer resembles anyone living or dead, the guy should be ashamed to admit it."

That just covers some of the highlights of SPACEWARP. Honestly, now, how can you go through life not reading SPACEWARP?

BURROUGHS BULLETIN: No. 9, V. and Dorothea Coriell, 1100 Western Avenue, Peoria, Illinois. The free fanzine devoted exclusively to Edgar Rice Burroughs' looks. Be sure and enclose a stamp when you send for it. A letter and article by Arthur Maxon, M.Sc., Cornell University, claims that Tarzan is a real person, and that he met him in Africa, and, as Tarzan himself says, "In fact, I'm a friend of Burroughs. He visits me at my estate quite often, and while he's there he takes notes on the stories I tell him." Whataya know! Move your Burroughs books over into the non-fiction shelves, all you librarians! Anybody wanna boycott the Burroughs Mystery?

SPEARHEAD: August, vol. 1 no. 3; Editor Tom Carter, 817 Starling Ave, Martinsville, Va.. Ten cents per copy, and with thirty-seven mimeographed pages they can't win. A look at the contents page shows David H. Keller, Wrai Ballard, Herman King, Gerry de la Ree, Redd Boggs, Art Rapp, and Don Wilson contributing. What more can you want? The cover, by Ray Nelson, depicts a couple looking at the exploding ruins of an atom-bombed city.

Also included with this copy is a copy of a mimeo fifty-one page novel, and a letter about it from Tom Carter:

Dear Rog:

Under separate cover I'm sending you a review copy of "No Greater Dream" by Joe Kennedy. This is the first of a series of similar mimeographed booklets, and I would greatly appreciate your reviewing it in the CLUB HOUSE. You might mention that the price is 75c, which may sound like a lot, but which we must charge to break even. It will be followed by a collection of the best of the Amy Worth Tales by Keller. A rarely fine collection....

Cordially,
Tom.

And I might add that the mimeography is perfect. It's an excellent job and well worth the seventy-five cents. Good luck, Tom, and I hope you sell enough copies to break even. Every fan knows how expensive it is to put out.

ROCKET NEWS LETTER: journal of the Chicago Rocket Society, 15c, \$1.50/yr.; Vincent Story, 5747 University Ave., Chicago, Ill. This is developing into a really worthwhile zine, and gives you the latest in rocket research and theory from the technical minds that spend all their time on it. Pro writers and fans alike

will find plenty here. In the July issue is a very excellent article on "Fission Particles as Rocket Propellants", by Wayne Proell, and "Military Objectives of Space Flight", by W.T. Moore. If you live within travelling distance of Chicago ask about the meetings of the Rocket Society which are held once a month at Roosevelt College.

BLOOMINGTON NEWS LETTER: August 1949; free, but send a stamp to pay postage; Bob Tucker, P.O. Box 260, Bloomington, Illinois. Circulation is now around four hundred copies. And with this issue Redd Boggs joins News Letter as a regular contributor. This zine has literally hundreds of current bits of fannews in its six, double column pages. Highlight of the issue is the news that the Founder of the Fantasy Foundation of Fandom, ol' 4F, has gotten married!

FANTOPOLOGIST: vol. 1, no. 2, H. T. McAdams, The Marco Press, Bethalto, Illinois. No price listed, but send a stamp at least, if you want a copy. This is the fanzine slanted for fans interested in mathematics, and especially the more stf aspects of math. Hyperspace, matrices, topology, and all those interesting branches of advanced math in simple language, and with some really good writing.

ODD: published when and if; 10c; R.D. Fisher, Jr., 1303 Lester St. Poplar Bluff, Mo.. Mimeographed, with hekto illos. The feature in this issue is a story, "Doctor Russel's Last Experiment", by Max.

WASTELAND REVIEW: 10c; Tom Voorhees, 807 E. Pastime, Tucson Arizona; bi-monthly, as the literary zine of the Tucson Science Fiction Society. Tom writes he would like reader contributors especially; poetry and short stories. This is the first issue. O.K., you prolific fan writers, give him a boost.

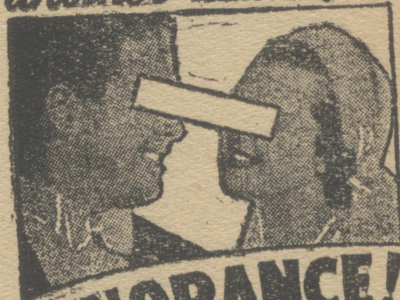
SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT: 10c; Alan M. Grant, 219 Huntleigh Ave., Fayetteville, N.Y..

This hektozine is for the younger fans who are interested in making things for themselves, and gives mostly short factual articles. It could develop into something if enough of you fan inventors and gadget-eers get to work on it with Alan and make it into something. This issue contains articles titled, Dry Disc Rectifiers, Ultra-Midget Miracles, Throw Away Radio, and Sixty Second Crystal Set.

That's all for this time. Next month I can give you my impressions of the Convention and New York.

—ROG PHILLIPS

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(Concluded from page 147)

I've got to get back and see if it worked."

The switch was still in the down position. Quickly Vic ran to the window, a silent prayer on his lips. A huge sigh of relief broke from him as he peered out. The borer had broken through the last crust, and as it did the capper had gone into action. Grant and Company had won in its race. The cap was on and the rest would be a matter of time and work. Vic had saved the world. For hadn't he timed it just right the borer would have broken through the crust and the escaping gas would have taken fire and exploded. The whole planet would have become a flaming pyre for every human on its surface....

He ran from the cab and told them of what had happened.

"That's fine," Bill wheezed. "But what about Molik's men above in the field of operation? We're still not out of the fire."

But Vic thought otherwise. The sight of them, Vic said, plus the fact that they had an energy gun would convince them Molik had lost.

"....What's more if we promise immunity they'll give in," Vic said.

He was right in every respect.

The audio-television was blaring the news to the world. Grant and Company had obtained all rights to the energy of the Earth's interior by being first at the scene.

Bill Meredith, his arm in a sling, the other about the shoulder of his wife sat on the edge of an easy chair which his wife occupied. Norma and Vic Stewart were seated side by side on a love seat. They had waited only until Bill's and Sally's son had gone to bed before the talk began.

"What do you think Molik would have done?" Bill asked.

"He was crazy, for sure," Vic answered. "And it's hard to say what a madman can do. I thought he was at the seat of all the trouble, but I couldn't quite figure out how he was going to manage. But he was right about one thing. Whoever controls this thing, controls the world."

"Then let me tell you something you *don't* know," Norma said as her fingers caressed the torn flesh of Vic's cheek. "Grant and Company is but another name for the United States Government."

"What?" the two men exclaimed in unison.

"That's right. My mission was a secret. I was sent to check up on what happened to a certain instrument. The same instrument Molik had stolen. We knew then that maybe other interests might try sabotage. The Government couldn't permit a private firm the gigantic powers which would be theirs should this undertaking be successful. And the Government also knew Europeans Inc. was but another name for a foreign power. We had to get there first."

"So—o!" Vic acted angry. "A spy, eh. A Mata-Hari, eh. My lovely little spy. Tell me, Mata, how would you like to live in Gehenna?"

She shuddered involuntarily. "Uh, uh. I was too close to the literal thing to want to live in its name-sake."

"Darling," Vic whispered gently. "No matter what its name, wherever you are is Heaven. Just remember that."

The kiss he got in return for his words made him forget all his wounds, except the one love gives. And that Death alone can remove...

THE END

TV INGENUITY

By LYNN STANDISH

AS EVERYONE knows the two systems of transmitting TV signals from one place to another over long distances, are by either coaxial cable or high frequency relay stations. There are numerous links of both types lacing various portions of the country. Each has its advantages and disadvantages with the edge going to the relay, we think.

Coaxial cable is buried beneath the ground. It is expensive but tough. It has, however certain limitations with regard to the width of the signal it can carry. This means that not as many channels can be sent nor as clearly. Furthermore it requires numerous booster stations along the line.

On the other hand the relay station is nothing but a re-transmitter which picks up the signal and rebroadcasts it in a narrow beam which is flipped from tower to tower at forty or fifty mile intervals. It can have any band width and the number of channels it will handle is only limited by the transmitting facilities. Of course it requires constant maintainance, even without occupancy. These signal towers with their parabolic antennas will undoubtedly be a very familiar part of the American landscape from now on. They

are unattended and equipped with automatic devices that guard against trouble. They're expensive but permanent. Furthermore they require a minimum of area.

In view of these facts we think that the major long distance TV systems will favor the relay station method. It is a rather romantic and picturesque sight to see this lone chain of stations silently distributing the fascinating views it can. Eventually every spot in America will be linked to every other spot by the invisible chain of audio and video radio waves, just as the former links us now.

It is interesting to note that a number of small towns which are just a little beyond the fringe area of TV transmitters have successfully managed to have TV by constructing what might be called their "private relay stations". Technical minded men in the towns have thrown up high receiving towers capable of getting the signals, then re-amplified them and rebroadcast them over the surrounding area. The system works fine and undoubtedly will be a common method of supplying small towns off the beaten track with plenty of satisfactory video.

The clever ingenuity of the California amateur who built a TV transmitter from surplus parts and is now operating a lim-



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FANTASTIC FACTS

By **LEE OWENS**

WITCH DOCTOR SECRETS

FOR HUNDREDS of years the witch doctors of Africa have treated the diseases of their tribesmen with herbs and drugs found in the African bush country. They have kept their secrets to themselves handing them down from one generation to the next. Recently, through the persuasiveness of some British scientists, the native doctors have agreed to let their brews and potions be examined in modern laboratories. They consented after being told that their medicines may be able to help people all over the world. Their medicines will first be tested on laboratory animals to decide what value they have in treating human patients. Who can say to what extent the savage witch doctors can contribute to modern science?

THE BIG EYE AT WORK

THE WORLD'S largest and most powerful telescope which is located on Mt. Palomar in California, has done its first job. Scientists have peered through the scope and twice as far out into the heavens as they have ever been able to see before. Whole new worlds of stars were seen. To some who had once thought that there was an edge or an end to the universe, the big

telescope tends to prove this idea false. They have sighted stars so far distant that it takes their light a billion years to reach our Earth. Most astronomers now agree that there is no end to the universe, but that it goes on infinitely. But this is only the beginning of the new knowledge that will be gained through the use of the big telescope. In years to come it will unfold many facts which are mysteries to us now.

* * *

ANTI-SOCIAL PLANTS

MOTHER nature has provided certain trees and shrubs with methods of keeping away undesirable neighbors. Some plants send out heavy masses of roots that crowd out all other plant life. Recently it was discovered that some plants give off poison and wage a sort of chemical warfare against their associates. The leaves of the wormwood shrub contain a poison which is washed to the ground by rains thereby protecting it against aggression. A desert shrub called the "guayule plant" makes sure of a spot for itself giving off a poison through its roots. The poison effects the soil for quite a space around the plant, and any seeds that happen to fall in this area fail to sprout.

* * *

QUIET!

THE MODERN home is a marvel in many ways. Heating, resistance to corrosion, comfort, air conditioning, simple and logical placement of rooms and services, the lavish use of electrical gadgets—all these things are almost perfect. Yet, there is something wrong with most modern construction, something that is only now being considered. It is the matter of noise!

Our modern civilization is characterized by noise-making apparatus ranging from trains, cars, motors etc. to radios, clattering pans and active people. Yet to anyone examining our homes without previously being told, it would appear as if our houses were all located in hospital zones. This is for the simple reason that there is hardly any conscious effort made to insulate a home against noise.

As is usual, the initial steps have been taken in Europe, notably in Holland and England where a great deal of home acoustical research is being done. But it has filtered over here and various acoustical groups, cooperating with construction men, are trying to reach standards which will become universal.

Psychologists have attributed a portion of the nervousness so common to the constant exposure of the average American to a continual barrage of noise. Hence acoustic studies will undoubtedly have a strong influence on medicine.

The acoustical insulation of a home de-

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depends on certain unobvious things. Floors and ceiling must be suspended so as to absorb and dampen vibration and sound. Walls must be designed insulate not only against heat but against sound waves. Sometimes these two fields conflict and a compromise must be reached.

But in general skilled architectural design can provide insulation against noise. There are a large number of public apartment buildings in Holland and in England which have been constructed with a wide variety of techniques. These are occupied by ordinary families and are serving as laboratories to determine the best, cheapest and most efficient ways to eliminate the bugaboo.

For floors for example, there is no better sound deadener than two layers of concrete isolated by a layer of glass wool. This "floating floor" provides almost perfect sound isolation. For walls, cinder blocks, separated by a couple of inches of dead air space perform admirably.

It is probably true that in the years to come people will buy homes with this sound isolation in mind. It certainly is an important matter in shops, factories, laboratories and offices. But there it is being considered. Now it remains to come into the home. Drop that other shoe, Mack, before I go crazy!

RUBBER ROADS

SOMEDAY YOU may drive your car over a rubberized highway. Three states are planning to build test roads of natural rubber to determine whether such highways could be practical in this country. Rubberized highways are not a new idea. Holland and the Netherlands East Indies experimented with it before the war and found that they stood up very well during the difficult war years.

To make this new type of surfacing, rubber powder is mixed with an oil and asphalt. This gives the road an elastic quality which lets it wear much longer. The rubber keeps the moisture out and prevents freezing which often makes cracks in ordinary roads. The rubberized surface makes a non-skid road free from dust.

HEATED HIGHWAY

IN OREGON, a particularly dangerous stretch of road is heated to keep it free of ice and snow. Pipes have been buried eight inches under the concrete through which runs a mixture of water and anti-freeze heated by natural hot springs in the region. As this liquid runs through the pipes, it keeps the pavement about a fifty degree temperature.

Another short stretch of heated highway is in Detroit, Michigan. It is only 500 feet long and it is heated by electricity and is

thus kept free from slippery ice and snow. Because of the high cost of installing and maintaining such highways, they cannot be widely used in the United States, but along certain dangerous stretches of highway, it would certainly pay off in human lives to eliminate ice and snow.

* * *

4,000 M. P. H. WIND

A NEW WIND tunnel which creates a breeze of 4,000 miles per hour is being used by an aviation company to test guided missiles. This new tunnel does not use the blower system. Instead, one end of the tunnel holds a huge air-storage tank. Placed at the opposite end of the tunnel is a big vacuum tank. When they want the breeze to blow, they suck all the air out of the vacuum tank and pump the storage tank full. Then at the turn of a switch, the air rushes from the storage tank, through the tunnel and into the empty vacuum tank. The engineers place their scale models between the two tanks. They watch what happens to these miniatures when the air rushes by them, and instruments inside the models record information.

MECHANICAL MAIDS

★ By Pete Bogg ★

THIS MAGAZINE has harped loud and long about the prophecies of science fiction coming true. It has pointed with pride to the realization of these predictions—atomic power, moon rockets (they're almost here), mechanical brains etc. But we're overwhelmed with the fact that one needn't go outside his own home to see the miracle that imagination and scientific thought have wrought. In fact, the home, with TV, a myriad of appliances, automatic heating systems, radio, and many others, gives us the best example of all of technology at work.

Consider the case of the modern housewife. At her beck and call around the home are no human maid-servants in most homes at least. But instead she has dozens of electric motors that do everything a maid servant can do and do it better. No one need point out the miracle of the automatic electric stove, or the delightful mechanical mixers, or the powerful vacuum cleaners, or the brilliant fluorescent lighting or the magic of TV and radio. These things speak for themselves.

Among the most articulate of the home appliances is the automatic washing machine. This marvel of electrical and hydraulic ingenuity is a tribute to the relief of tedium. The expression "washerwoman" is synonymous with hard labor, with back-breaking work. But today it no longer

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Did science fiction ever go so far as to intimate that everything would be done by the machine? In its flightier moments perhaps it did, but we doubt whether anybody expected to see such complete dominance of the machine in such a short time. Anybody who has wasted time visualizing robots in pseudo-human form was simply off the beam. Our robots are squat functional creatures who don't walk around or who don't talk, but brother, they sure can work! We're spending our time now trying to think up something original that hasn't yet been invented—it's pretty hard to do!

BIOLOGICAL ATOM

★ By F. L. Cope ★

THOSE MEN who are seeking to discover the secret of life, do not turn to the complete animal to find their solution. Instead of attempting to study a whole creature, biologists go to the simplest form of living things, just as a chemist turns to the smallest and simplest molecules for his studies. The biologist works on the cell, the smallest living unit, which might be called the "atom of biology."

It is impossible to describe a living organism in terms of anything smaller than a single cell. The single cell is the complete life-unit itself. Any further reduction in size means one is no longer considering a living unit. Thus if a piece of tissue, say of the muscles of animals or humans, is broken down, the point is reached where the single cell alone exists. To examine a part of cell, is useless for it no longer lives. A part of a muscle cell, for example, will not exhibit the contractual or extensible properties of muscular tissue. One must have at least one whole cell to see that.

Cells as a rule are small, averaging probably no more than a hundredth of a milli-

meter in size though there are the exceptions. An ordinary egg is a huge single cell, but even here the majority of it is simple nutriment for the basic portions of the cell. A human's body contains over hundreds of thousands of billions of single cells!—all of them minute.

It has been suggested that dread diseases may be conquered in the same fashion as was the atomic bomb. For example, some say that the government should set huge laboratories and great sums of money for the elimination of cancer just as it did for the creation of the atomic bomb.

Unfortunately this idea is unsound. The atomic bomb was simply the solution of an engineering problem. Working on the malignant cells of cancer is still an unknown sort of problem. Scientists do not know from what direction the answer is likely to come because they know so little of the nature of life. If any solution is to be attempted effort and money must be spread over the whole realm of biological work—then from somewhere, maybe from an obscure biochemist working on cells, or perhaps from a man working with blood, will come a suggestion or a clue.

Biology is still in its rudimentary stages. The fusion of mathematician, chemist and physicist, with the biologist, is likely to give rise to a new kind of researcher with an extremely general sort of knowledge who will be able to see the problems and their biological solutions in an entirely different light.

Getting back to the original thesis, it looks like the answers to many human troubles, are going to come from the technologist who is making the study of cells his business. Somewhere, locked within that mysterious protoplasmic core, is a startling tale about the nature and meaning of life—and the biologist will dig it out!

BRAINSTORM

★ By June Lurie ★

A FEW weeks ago there was a brief newspaper item, hidden in the huge mass of daily trivia, which had startling implications. The article described the activities of a young technician, a man trained in electronics and with an inquiring mind. It said that he was experimenting with "brainwaves".

The article quoted the young man as saying that since it is a known scientific fact that the working brain involves great electrical activity, including the flow of electric currents, and it is known that radio waves are produced whenever an electric current flows, it automatically follows that the brain is radiating electromagnetic waves just as is a radio or TV transmitter. Furthermore the man maintained that the human mind is receptive to these radio waves and he gives that as an explanation

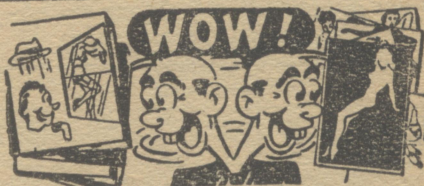
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for extra-sensory perception and the experiments of Dr. Rhine of Duke University.

These theories have been advanced before, but apparently this experimenter is going to great lengths to prove his contention. His laboratory is well equipped with encephalographs, oscilloscopes, and all the multitudinous apparatus of an electronics laboratory.

Unfortunately little else was said and no idea was given of his techniques, but we can extrapolate a great deal from what we know. It is true that the brain engages in electrical activities and that currents with their associate radio waves are produced. Science has known this for a long time. Undoubtedly regular labs are working on the same problem. The trouble is that we hear so little of the progress—if any—that we don't often think about the matter.

As we see it, the explanation of the brain as a radio transmitter is sound—but there is one difficult question to answer. Since the currents in the brain are so feeble and the resultant radio waves must also be weak, how is it possible for the mind to pick up these minute oscillations at any distance much less the thousands of miles over which extra-sensory perception has been known to occur?

The brain, in order to do that, must be an exceedingly sensitive receiver, much better than anything we have constructed in the lab. But this is contradictory too, for it is known that receivers have been made of incredible sensitivity, hardly capable of being exceeded by the brain. Yet...

We simply don't know the answer. Very likely it is possible as a number of scientists have suggested, that the future pursuit of science will revolve around psychology, biology and all the other natural sciences instead of the physical sciences as is now the case. In any case where there is a will there is a way, and Man is not prone to give up when a job is started. We predict that eventually the problem of brain communication will be solved—as it has been in so many science fiction stories. It is inevitable. Apparently there are no limits to human ingenuity.

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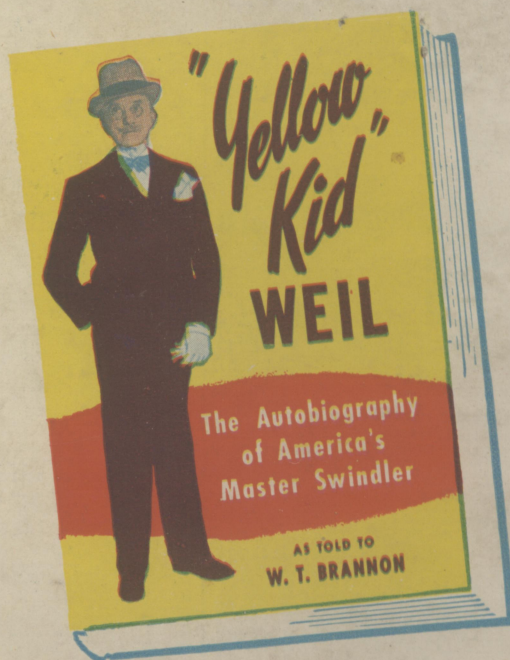
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